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— グリーン ライト —
Green Light

Doki
Doki
Yaoi Novel

VISIT...

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Calm down, Izumi. You have to think this through carefully and rationally. There must be some kind of mistake here. Otherwise there's no way he'd be reacting like you'd just confessed your love for him.

Shotaro Izumi hates Makoto Natsuki. He always has. Well...maybe not always. In elementary school, they were inseparable. But a misunderstanding turned the entire class against Izumi, and Natsuki rocketed into popularity. Now, they're fifteen, and Izumi is the most warped kid in school. A loner, sarcastic, and always spoiling for a fight with Natsuki's friends, his 'entourage.' Until one day, after school, Izumi issues a challenge, to humiliate the Prince Charming of their class.

"Then go out with me."

"...Out where?"

The classic dumb response. *"I'm saying let's enter a 'chaste, platonic courtship.'"*

But what starts out as a joke, turns into something else when Natsuki takes Izumi seriously. Old friendship and habits are reawakened, but has something else developed in their years apart? Warped and anti-social Izumi has no idea what to do when the class star only has eyes for him.

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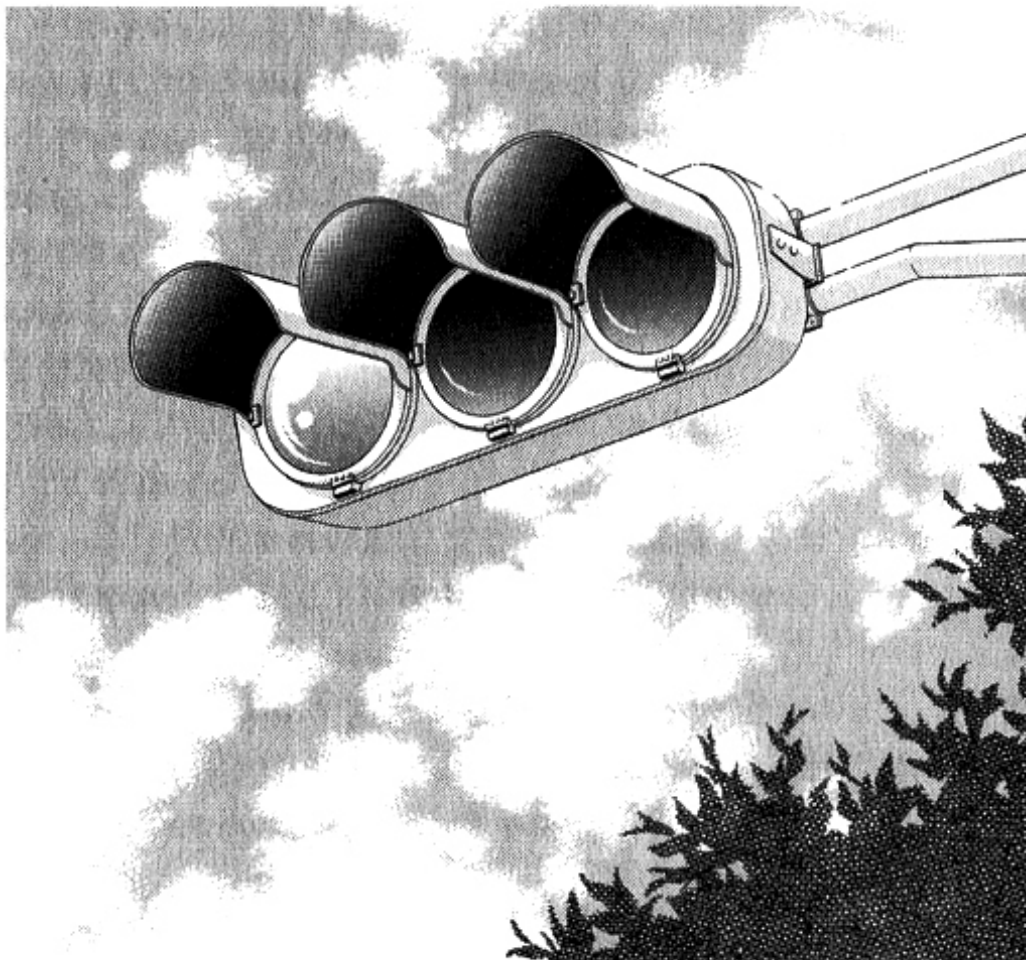
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Green Light



Green Light

If someone were to ask me what my proudest accomplishment in life was so far, I'd answer, "Not developing school phobia as an elementary school student even though all the girls kept telling me I was a scumbag."

The cause of the whole thing was that I'd spoken sharply to the most popular boy in class. He was a pretty-boy with fair skin, exactly the type of kid you'd expect the girls to love. And he wasn't just cute—he was a nice guy, and smart, so the boys liked him, too. I suppose you could call him the star of the class.

But one day, he got injured in gym class, and he cried. His soft-looking cheeks got bright red, and these beautiful tears were streaming down his face. The sight was shockingly touching. The teachers and the other students swarmed around him with their hearts all aflutter, asking "Are you okay?" But I remained unfazed.

In fact, I told him, "Be a man and stop sobbing like that! You're such a sissy."

Boy, did *that* ever get me in trouble. The girls thronging around their star whirled around and glared at me.

"Izumi, you're a scumbag!"

"That was mean, Shotaro!"

And so the girls came to regard me as a heartless scumbag, and they raked me over the coals pretty badly for it. Girls are scary when they're in groups.

What made it even nastier though, was that they weren't doing it to bully me or play pranks—their excuse was their sense of justice. When people were sure they were in the right, you could object all you wanted, but even the soundest arguments weren't going to get through to them.

What's more, these girls started saying "You tell him you're sorry!" demanding apologies when they weren't even the victims.

But I refused to apologize. No matter how you looked at it, a guy who cries over a little fall was just pathetic, right? If he'd been bullied, or if he were some wimpy crybaby, I'd have been in the wrong, but he wasn't that weak. After all, that star was my best friend at the time, and I knew everything there was to know about him.

I tried telling the girls that, but they were too furious to listen; they just persecuted me even more. After awhile though, even the boys (who'd been staying out of it) took the girls' side, and soon, I was completely cut off from the rest of the class.

Why didn't I skip a single day even in such tragic circumstances? Simple: I was a pretty stubborn guy. I wasn't about to give them the chance to declare victory by running away, so I forced myself to keep coming to school every day. Thanks to that, not only am I stubborn, I also have a pigheaded perseverance and a personality twisted about 180 degrees...but those aren't exactly useful skills.

I wasn't inclined to cry over my tragic misfortunes at that point, though. No matter how hard I tried, there was no way I'd be able to make peace with classmates who thought "Let's work together to bring down Izumi, the Prince of Darkness!"

And even if I tried to become a different person, I sure as hell couldn't have the charm of that class star who was loved by everybody. That star who'd been so small and cute back then had grown up into a veritable Prince Charming on his white horse.

"Hey, check this out. This week's pinup girl is your precious Erina Chitose!"

"Whoa, seriously? Let me see that!"

I was abruptly dragged out of my memories of five years ago and back into the present by a pair of cheerful voices.

I'd been pretty spaced out—for a moment, I had no idea what I was doing, but I remembered when I saw a broom in my hand.

School was out, and it was cleanup time. I was in charge of my tenth grade classroom, and my homeroom teacher Ms. Endo (impertinently addressed by the class as "Tohru") was hard-core about checking up on the cleaning. When Tohru's classroom was the least bit dirty, she made you clean everything all over again, so everyone hated when it was their turn to be in charge.

I hated cleaning as much as the next guy, but today I wanted to get home quickly to watch a show I'd recorded, so I'd been sweeping diligently. But I'd spaced out at some point and gotten wrapped up in bad memories from my past.

Did my elementary school days traumatize me badly enough for memories to come back to haunt me at bizarre times like this...? Naw, it only happened because our class star happens to be here, that's all.

"Erina is just so cute. These dimples are the best."

"Yeah, right. I know you only have eyes for the boobs, Natsuki."

"No, no, I like the nape of the neck!"

At this shout from the star, the boy they'd called "Natsuki," the five guys surrounding him started laughing. "Ahaha, what a maniac!"

I stared coldly at the group horsing around in front of the blackboard. The boy at the center of their boisterous circle was Makoto Natsuki. He was in the same grade as me. He had glossy, silken black hair and his tall, slender frame was well-muscled. Then there were his big round eyes, shapely nose, perfectly aligned white teeth, and a complexion any girl would envy.

He had a pathetically idiotic expression on his face, but in any case, he was a fresh-faced hunk. Those orthodox good looks made the "prince on a white horse" title suit him perfectly.

"Okay, Natsuki, then shouldn't Ayako Sugiura be your type?" Their voices all suddenly dropped, like they were discussing something secretly. Even I, the guy with hardly any friends, knew that name. She was from the class next door, and I remember people

saying she was the prettiest girl in school. I'd only seen her in passing, but she was definitely cute. Cheerful, too, and as popular as Natsuki.

Come to think of it, there were rumors that Sugiura and Natsuki were dating. Not that I had any idea whether they were true.

"But Sugiura's got long hair, so you can't even see the nape of her neck!"

"Moron! When a long-haired chick wears her hair up and you can see the back of her neck, that's the best. It's better when you only see it a little, you know?"

"What, Tagawa, have you converted to the nape religion, too?"

When a guy next to Natsuki named Tagawa started making this impassioned case for long-haired girls, the others instantly started picking on him. Tagawa was fickle and always kind of shallow, so his frequent silly remarks were always greeted with disgust or mocking laughter.

Natsuki crooked his finger invitingly. "Napes are real nice, Tagawa. Come on over to my world!"

"Thanks, but no thanks! What I care about is a nice ass!" Tagawa cried, looking dead serious.

The crowd immediately roared with laughter. What a simple adolescence they were living—must be nice. Love, friendship, and sleazy talk: it was a healthy high-school-student conversation.

Not that I had any interest in those things. Girls were scary, I had no friends, and I didn't have much of a sex drive. I'd rather watch more shows and movies than waste time on that stuff any day.

Hey, that's right.

I'd wanted to get home right away to watch the episode of *Buddhist Prayer Rangers: Monkman* I'd recorded, but because these morons hanging around in front of the blackboard weren't doing a damn bit of cleaning, I was still stuck here! This was why I hated groups like that.

As I upped my cleaning speed, I openly glared at Natsuki and his group of cronies. But they were still having a grand old time talking about pinup girls and Sugiura, and they were totally oblivious to my cold looks.

The teacher never came to do the cleaning check unless a student went and got her, so at this rate, I'd never get home.

And this week's episode is the super-exciting one where Monk Yellow finishes his month of rigorous ascetic exercises and comes back as Monk Gold.

Man, remembering that made me want to get home right that instant.

"Hey," I called out to them in a low voice. But they either didn't hear or were intentionally ignoring me, because they didn't turn around. I gave a little shrug and opened my mouth again. "Hey, Natsuki."

As soon as I added his name, the guys around him turned towards me even faster than he did. Their reaction speed was like knights protecting a prince.

"Is something wrong, Izumi?" In stark contrast to the open wariness of the boys around him, Natsuki's smile was infinitely pleasant.

"You bet your ass there is. Would you quit having fun with your entourage and start cleaning already?" I asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"What?! Who are you calling his 'entourage'?!" said a boy nearby named Matsuno, flaring his eyes at me angrily. Matsuno was the hanger-on I got along with the least. He was always the quickest to lash out at me.

Natsuki placated him and then turned to me apologetically. "Sorry, I know we've been slacking off too much. We'll finish up here, so you can go on home if you've got something urgent to do."

"What? Why?! It's no fair if one person gets to cut out early!"

“Look, Izumi’s been cleaning all by himself. He’s done enough for us already.”

Matsuno and the others still looked pissed, but when they saw Natsuki was serious, they grudgingly obeyed.

There was a real honor student for you! With that response he shot his own stock way up in value, and plunged my approval ratings way down, though I doubt it was calculated. He was a perceptive guy, but he had a blind spot for people’s jealousy and envy.

I was glad he let me go so quickly, though. I promptly turned around, put the broom in the locker we were using for cleaning supplies, and then went back to my desk and stuffed my books and notepads into my bag. Then, just as I was about to leave the room, I suddenly felt someone’s gaze on me. When I turned to look, Natsuki’s friends were glaring at me. Their jealous eyes screamed “How dare you interrupt our fun?”

If just one of them were doing it, that would’ve been one thing, but since everyone but Tagawa were glaring at me, it was seriously annoying. It’d be nice if the master of these mannerless idiots would do something about them, but that was a lost cause. He’d started concentrating on cleaning, and was oblivious to our silent battle.

I shrugged and turned to Natsuki from the doorway. “Okay, I’m taking you up on your offer and getting out of here. You hurry up and get this place clean. Order your entourage to do it.”

Hearing this, his hangers-on flipped. “Who are you calling his ‘entourage’?!”

Who else? I thought, sighing pointedly.

“Hey, Izumi, why do you have to put things that way? It’s pretty obnoxious,” scolded Tagawa from next to Natsuki. He was looking back and forth between Matsuno and me, apparently worried about the hostile mood. He looked like he wanted to settle things peaceably, but the others didn’t pick up on his intentions.

“Eh, just leave him, Tagawa. Izumi complains no matter what Natsuki does. He picks a fight with Natsuki every chance he gets.”

“Yeah, he’s just jealous. Male envy is an ugly thing.”

The voices of the entourage were filled with hostility.

“I, er...” Tagawa faltered. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but in the end he fell silent. I watched him coolly.

A long time ago, Tagawa and I were friends, too. But ever since the conflict between Natsuki and me, Tagawa drifted away from me just like everybody else. I didn’t care what Matsuno said to me, but Tagawa’s uneasy face was the one thing that gave me a pang of hurt. I dropped my eyes, clenching my fists tightly.

Just then, a sharp voice suddenly echoed through the classroom. “Cut it out, you guys! You’re being rude to Izumi!”

When I turned to look, Natsuki’s normally mild-mannered expression had been replaced by anger.

“But Natsuki...”

“Don’t give me your ‘buts’! It’s our fault for slacking off. It’s only natural he wants to complain!” He came and stood between us as if to shield me from them.

Natsuki was always like this. No matter how nasty or sarcastic I was, he never got mad. In fact, he acted considerate of my feelings. He was such a good guy it was unbelievable. But it was hard for me to deal with someone so perfect.

He was softhearted, cheerful, energetic, and genuine—the type of guy who’d be the leader if he were in a superhero show. But putting it another way, you could also say he was the type who was friendly to anybody, who tried to be all things to all people. Call me warped, but when I saw him smiling at anybody and everybody, it irritated me.

I glared at Matsuno and the others, flung the door open, and left the classroom. Stomping loudly toward the shoe cubbies at the front door, I fled the school. I walked down the road next to the courtyard at practically a gallop and burst through the front gate of the school.

From there, it was just the school road, perfectly straight and surrounded on either side by woods thick with cherry trees and magnolias. Walking in the shade of the trees, I looked up at

the early-summer sky, where the sun was still high above. In my wretched mood, even the nice weather pissed me off. Sure, I knew how dumb it was to take my anger out on the sky, but all pleasant things were enemies to me. The springtime of life, bittersweet love, passionate friendship: not only were all those things strangers to me, the only memories I had were miserable ones.

"Izumi!"

As I heaved a gloomy sigh, I heard someone calling my name from behind. When I turned around, someone was running toward me from the direction of the gate. It was Natsuki. While I was busy being confused by this, he came up and stood in front of me.

"Th-Thank goodness, I caught you!" Natsuki smiled as he panted for breath.

Even the sweat soaking Mr. Pleasant's forehead looked refreshing. Two girls who'd passed near Natsuki were stealing glances at him and exchanging whispers of "It's Natsuki!" and "Oh my God!"

"Oh my God," my ass.

"What do you want? I thought you said I could go home."

"You can, but...wait a sec...it's still hard to breathe..."

"Were you going for some new world record? How fast did you sprint here?"

"Well, I figured if I didn't hurry, you'd get away. But I caught you, so that's a load off my mind." After letting out a huge breath, Natsuki gave me a relieved smile.

Those words with that smile—he was a born Casanova. It tugged a little on even *my* heartstrings, and I was a guy. Of course, when I said 'little,' I meant smaller than a grain of sand.

"I'm sorry about what happened back there. They said some mean things to you."

"Why are you apologizing? The master takes responsibility for the errors of his entourage, is that it?"

When I hurled this sarcasm at him before he could finish his apology, Natsuki's shoulders slumped.



"Later I'll tell them to apologize to you. But before that, I wanted to make sure I apologized. After all, it was my fault to begin with for not cleaning."

He looked just like a scolded puppy, inviting compassion from all who looked at him—but if he thought that would make *me* forgive him, he was mistaken. On the contrary, it actually pissed me off more.

Don't you be blinking back tears with those long lashes around me, pretty boy! You make it look like I'm a jerk picking on poor Natsuki!

I choked back my urge to scream this at him.

"Whatever, I don't care. And there's no point in you apologizing anyway."

"Huh? Why not?"

"'Why not'? Do you seriously not get it? If you apologize to me, the guys around you are just gonna sympathize with 'poor Natsuki' and come glaring at me. To put it bluntly, you talking to me is the biggest nuisance here."

It was only *after* I'd spat the words in my snidest tones and thrown in a sardonic laugh as a bonus that I realized I'd gone too far. Natsuki looked at me sadly. When he said "sorry" to me with that morose face, even I felt really uncomfortable.

And then, a moment after the air between us had become oppressive—

"Natsuki! I finally found you!" burst a high-pitched voice out of nowhere, and we both looked up.

The owner of the voice was a girl from our school, running toward us from the gate. She made a beeline for Natsuki, sending the skirt she'd shortened to just above the knee fluttering in the breeze. Smoothing her shoulder-length hair with its loose permanent wave as she came to a stop before us, she let out a big breath.

"Honestly, I've been looking everywhere for you, Natsuki! You better not tell me you mean to just go home."

"What's got you in such a rush, Sugiura?"

Natsuki turned to the girl he'd called 'Sugiura' and blinked at her, puzzled.

"I wanted to talk to you. But when I went to your classroom, you weren't there! You skipped out on cleaning duty with no shame at all, didn't you?"

"I was planning to head right back when I was done here. And I told them that!"

"I don't know, Natsuki. You are a smooth talker...but more importantly, shouldn't you be hurrying back? If you guys don't finish cleaning, your teacher will lose patience and come check on you." Sugiura wagged her index finger sternly as she spoke.

You could see why people said she put the starlets to shame. She was adorable even when she pouted. She'd been completely ignoring me the whole time, even though I was standing right next to her.

"Now, stop dawdling and come along. I'll help out too."

"Okay, Sugiura, I get you. Sorry, but would you go on ahead and tell Tagawa and the others that I'll be right there?"

"Sure, but..."

Sugiura puffed her cheeks a little in frustration, turning towards me for the first time. "Izumi, did you say something mean to Natsuki again? I don't know what your problem with him is, but try not to act too childish."

I let that shrill voice pass without even listening.

Childish, my ass. If you don't know what you're talking about, then don't come attacking me without hearing my side of the story.

I felt anger welling up in my stomach, and I turned around to walk away. I wasn't about to take any more unreasonable treatment when all I'd done was some earnest cleaning.

"Izumi, wait!"

I brushed off Natsuki's plea and began walking rapidly. I got the feeling he was going to try to come after me again, so I broke off the school road and headed into the woods, cutting my way through an animal trail overgrown with weeds.

In the woods, it was quiet. When I stopped hearing Natsuki's voice from the direction of the school road, I let my shoulders sag with relief. Ever since making enemies of everyone around me, I'd been most comfortable when I was alone. Maybe I was being overly self-conscious, but when I was in school, I felt like my classmates were always looking at me coldly, and I couldn't relax.

"Man, I'm lame," I muttered.

As I spoke, I felt unaccustomed tears welling in my eyes. I shook my head against them and concentrated on pulling myself together. If I'd had even one friend, I probably wouldn't have turned out this warped, but these days, even my old friend Tagawa and I hardly ever spoke.

When I left the woods, I was still in a glum mood. But then a large form suddenly stood before me, blocking my way, and I let out a shriek.

"Oh, sorry I startled you. You okay?"

"N-Natsuki...?" I looked up at the boy standing right in front of me, clutching my still-pounding heart. "What are you doing here?"

"I figured if you were going through the woods you'd come out around here, so I got here ahead of you and waited. I mean, if I'd chased after you, you'd have run, right?"

"Waited'?" I mumbled to myself, stunned. He wouldn't have been able to come down the road to ambush me here unless he ran pretty fast. Natsuki may have been on the track team, but I wasn't a slow runner either. After all, I'd been a member of the track team, too.

"I was anxious to catch up since you took off in the middle of our conversation."

"Well, I don't have any more to say to you. I mean, hurry up and go clean, already. Tagawa and the others are waiting for you."

"Yeah, but I haven't really apologized yet. And then even Sugiura talked to you like that...I'm sorry."

"Like I said, that's not something you should apologize for. It's just annoying."

I'd unconsciously raised my voice, and Natsuki was startled.

"Sorry," he said glumly. Then, after a pause: "But I really want to talk to you, Izumi," he sighed, a serious look on his face. "It wasn't just today; you've had a lot of bad stuff happen to you because of me for a long time, right? I should've helped you out, but I could never do anything, and I feel really sorry for that."

"Whatever..."

He bowed deeply to me in apology, and I looked away awkwardly. It was the kind of thing an apology couldn't fix. If Natsuki defended me, everyone around him would just glare at me more, saying stuff like "Natsuki's just such a nice guy," and "You should be the one apologizing, Izumi."

"I'm really sorry I've let you suffer because of my uselessness."

"I told you to cut that out," I spat. "If you apologize to me, people hate me even more."

Natsuki's face clouded. It was plain I'd hurt his feelings, but I had the right to say that much. I believed that, but it didn't make me feel any better. There was a bitter aftertaste in my mouth that just kept spreading.

"Hey, Izumi. Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Anything to make things right with you. I'll do whatever you want."

"Okay, look, that thoughtfulness right there is exactly what causes me trouble. If you want what's best for me, just leave me alone."

"All right, I get that. But I won't feel right unless I do something." He drew closer to me, a serious look on his face.

But how the hell was I supposed to answer him? He probably wouldn't back down unless I said something, though. That stubbornness was starting to piss me off. I bit my lip.

Natsuki had possessed a strong sense of justice ever since he'd been a quiet little boy. If he saw someone in trouble he couldn't leave

them alone; he'd take the initiative to look after them. Of course, I'd brushed off his help, but setting that aside as an exception, his trustworthiness commanded respect even from our teachers.

I was a pathetic loser for always taking a jaundiced view of a guy like that. And I didn't like how his eyes looked like they knew what I really felt, either.

"All right," I muttered. "If you insist..."

But having said that, nothing came to mind. I pretended to think deeply, just wanting to give Natsuki some trouble. I'd been treated unreasonably over and over today, and I was annoyed at him big time.

"Will you really do *anything*?"

"Yeah, of course." Natsuki nodded emphatically.

The next instant, Ayako Sugiura's face popped into my head. I didn't know why, but on the spur of the moment it prompted me to blurt out...

"Then go out with me."

"...Out where?"

"The classic dumb response. I'm saying let's enter a 'chaste, platonic courtship,'" I said, straight-faced.

Natsuki's eyes widened into saucers, the smile frozen on his face.

Whoa, check out that dumbass expression. So even hunks can look like that, huh?

"Um, so you mean, um..."

He was totally flustered, as if I'd answered him in a language he didn't understand. I watched him, grinning broadly. I'd only said "go out with me" to harass him, of course. I'd intended to reveal that I was kidding right away, but Mr. Prince's confusion was so entertaining that I decided to let him stay that way for a while.

"Well, think about it." I gave him a wave and turned away.

He didn't call me back. And so I got to go home in a brighter mood than I'd experienced in some time.

Fast-forward to that night. I was holed up in my room, sitting formally on my heels on top of my bed.

*Man, that episode of **Buddhist Prayer Rangers: Monkman** was totally awesome. It must be the screenwriter's talent. The direction wasn't bad, either. It's a pity the sets look so cheap—can't they do something about that?*

My stiff posture as I mulled over this point didn't actually have anything to do with *Monkman*. In front of me lay an open cell phone. Its screen displayed a newly arrived text message, and I was staring down at the words.

The sender was Makoto Natsuki. I hadn't gotten a text from him in a long time; not since way back when he'd forced me to exchange cell phone numbers with him. Just getting the message was a surprise, but its contents were shocking enough to make me sit up and withdraw from reality.

"Do you really want to go out with me?"

What the hell was this? When I first read it, I had no clue what he was talking about. It was after I unthinkingly muttered "Out where?" that I finally realized he was referring to our conversation after school. I'd thought Natsuki would just let a joke like that slide, but he'd taken it seriously instead.

I knew he was a really serious guy, but I didn't think he could be *this* idiotically serious. What was I supposed to do? I could reply with "That was a joke, you moron," but it pissed me off to reassure him like that. ("Oh, okay, I get it!" he'd answer with a laugh.)

"What's he gonna do if I mean it?"

Suddenly I was curious. I picked up my phone, and after wrestling with my thoughts for a while I started typing.

"What would you do if I said yes? I know you don't want to go out with me, so quit sending me self-important text messages."

Okay, that should do it. I read it over twice and hit "send." Natsuki's response was quick, and said about what I'd thought it would.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that, I just wanted to know whether you were serious or playing a joke on me."

"Like I could joke about something like that! I'm dead serious."

When I actually typed that, it seemed so realistic it grossed me out a little, but whatever. *Sending...*

"Okay, got it."

Oh, you got it now, do you? Wait, got what? Don't send such a noncommittal response! I fumed. How am I supposed to answer this?!

The phone fell silent as I struggled over how to respond.

I wonder if Natsuki's waiting for me to answer him? But the only possible response to a message like that was, "What do you mean? Got *what*?" Eventually I just texted him expressing that sentiment, and then waited for his answer.

An hour later, I still hadn't gotten another text from him.

Did he go to sleep? Was he in the bath? Or was he just ignoring me? I was in anguish before my cell finally chirped.

"I mean let's go out."

I see, so that's how he's playing it. He wants to go out... wait, what?

"WHAT?!" I was so shocked that I screeched loudly enough to make myself choke, and started coughing.

Calm down, Izumi. You have to think this through carefully

and rationally. There must be some kind of mistake here. Otherwise there's no way he'd be reacting like you'd just confessed your love for him.

Man, my whole body was breaking out in a cold sweat. Wait, why was my face getting red? And my heart was pounding, even. It was almost like I was happy that...*No, uh-uh, no way.*

"You're a moron."

I was so shaken, my fingers were practically stabbing at the buttons as I typed.

"Why? Don't tell me you think I'm kidding you?"

"Yep."

"Izumi, is it okay if I call you?"

My whole body froze so quickly you could practically hear ice cracking. *Is he seriously going to call me? Does he intend to make me listen to his pleasant voice at a time like this?*

I paused.

Nope, no way, forget it. Just forget it. What the hell am I supposed to say now?

While I was holding my head in anguish, my cell phone started playing a different melody than before. It was the ending theme to *Monkman*. I'd set it as my ringtone. *That bastard, he called me without waiting for an answer!*

While my thumb was hovering over the "talk" button in uncertainty, the song eventually ended, only to be replaced by the incoming-text melody (*Monkman's* opening theme).

"Why won't you answer the phone? Is this a bad time?"

"Forget it. I'm too embarrassed to pick up."

I agonized quite a bit before hitting "send," and then immediately regretted doing it. I sounded just like a naïve, innocent little girl!

"Okay, I'll tell you this in a text then. I wasn't joking before. I really want to go out with you, Izumi."

"Look, stop kidding around already. You really are an idiot, aren't you?"

"You won't believe me no matter what?"

"More like no normal person would buy that."

"Should the two of us go out on a date, then?"

"Why?!" Before I realized it, I was questioning him out loud. This was bad—I had no idea what was going on. I couldn't tell what he was thinking at all.

"We should really talk about this in person anyway, right? So let's go on a date to celebrate the beginning of our relationship."

Natsuki's latest text was kicking me while I was down. Somehow, I had the feeling he was missing the point, but I didn't have enough composure to say that. My head had started to feel hot and I was dizzy. While I was dealing with that, Natsuki texted me to say he was going to go take a bath, and decided the time and place for the date without me before I could recover. In the end, I'd let Natsuki's momentum steamroll me, and I hadn't been able to pin down his true motives.

"What the heck is going on?" I mumbled, looking up at the

ceiling. No answer came to me. Was Natsuki serious? And anyway, wasn't he dating Sugiura? No matter how I looked at it, I could only assume he was teasing me. The one thing that bugged me was would a guy that straight-laced really go to the trouble of setting me up?

If anything, it was easier to believe he'd said those things out of sympathy than out of a desire to tease me. That would be more in line with his personality. I felt that pain in my heart you get when you didn't expect your lottery ticket to win, but you had just a little hope for it, so you were kinda let down when it lost.

"How softhearted can he get?"

I laid down face-up on the bed and closed my eyes.

But depending on how you look at it, this could be my chance. I might be able to get the only possible dirt on this nice, handsome, perfect guy. If Natsuki were gay, it'd do some hefty social damage to someone as popular as he is.

I imagined Natsuki on the verge of tears, and grinned. But there was something I didn't realize at the time—namely, that if the rumor spread that Natsuki was gay, the moment they thought he was dating me, they'd think *I* was gay too. But by the time I realized this critical oversight with a cry of horror, it was the day of the date. I was already on the train and just five minutes from our meeting place, so it was too late to cancel. I stood there dumbly, all the blood draining from my face.

Man, I'm an idiot.

That Sunday was a beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky, and the world sparkled with the sunbeams reflected off of trees and rooftops. When the back of your neck starts to sweat just from walking around, it was really summer. The piercing blue sky, the hot winds. It was refreshing and pleasant: the perfect day for a date.

Sigh.

I dragged myself off the train with heavy steps and came through the turnstile. On the way, I'd considered turning around and going home, but by now I was resigned. I'd been hated by my classmates from the beginning anyway. At this point, it was no big deal. *In fact, if I can get revenge on Natsuki, then bring it on!*

"Even I have to say that's pretty negative thinking..." I muttered with a dry smile.

Natsuki's instructions said to meet at the south exit of H Station in front of the hawk statue. I didn't think it was necessary to meet at such a couple's hangout, but I couldn't argue Natsuki's point that it was the easiest spot to find, so I'd reluctantly agreed.

We were supposed to meet at 11:00, so I was already five minutes late. But I hadn't been able to sleep a wink last night, so my feeling was that he could excuse that.

When I trudged up the stairs to the exit I could see the giant hawk statue right in front of me, and Natsuki standing next to it.

"Izumi, over here!"

When Natsuki saw me, he gave me an even brighter smile than usual. That annoying pleasantness galled me, and I drew myself up to my full height in front of him and glowered. "So, can I hit you?"

"Huh? Why?!"

"That grin of yours pisses me off."

"Well, that's a mean thing to say."

Even when I raised my fist at him, Natsuki just gave me a troubled smile. That smile seemed to sparkle somehow.

"You look happy," I said.

"Of course. This is the first time we've hung out in a long time, Izumi. I've been looking forward to it since we set it up."

Unsure how to respond to this point-blank avowal, I mumbled something noncommittal.

Like hanging out with me would actually be any fun. What a weirdo. Or is he just being polite?

While I was pondering this and that, Natsuki peered at me and broached his own topic.

"So, Izumi, where do you want to go today?"

"Um..." I frowned and fell silent. How could I think of someplace off the top of my head? I'd never been on a date with anyone before.

"Wherever, I don't care. Why don't you just pick somewhere?"

"Okay, well, it's a little early, but how about we eat lunch somewhere and plan our day there?"

"Sure, fine with me."

When we started off walking side by side, the conversation suddenly became awkward. Natsuki made attempts to talk to me, but I wasn't sure how I should interact with someone I normally never spoke to, so I only gave one-word answers like "Yeah," or "Oh."

I wondered if I needed to say things like "Oh, you!" or "Stop, you're embarrassing me!" if I wanted to make sure we looked like a couple, but that was too embarrassing. Or more like too stupid. On top of it that, Natsuki had been weirdly enthusiastic for the last few minutes, and I didn't know how to respond.

"I'm so glad it's sunny today. It was raining all the time right up through yesterday, and I was worried it wouldn't clear up. Oh, that's right! What do you want to eat, Izumi? I know lots of good restaurants, so if there's something you want, we'll go there."

Natsuki was chattering nonstop, undiscouraged by my curt responses. He was always a sociable guy, but he seemed unusually hyper today. *He's acting just like a boy keyed up about his first date with a girl.*

As I was thinking this, he said, "Oh, right. Say, Izumi, since we're out on a date and everything, why don't we hold hands?"

At those words—which were uttered with the most gigantic smile you could imagine—I stiffened. Then I turned and glared tightly at the man next to me. He stood a full head taller than I did. His expression was serious. He was steadily gazing at me with an earnest look in his eyes.

“...What kind of joke is that? Is it a trap? Or harassment?”

“None of those things, sheesh. Holding hands is pretty basic on a date, right?”

“Like a guy could do something that silly!” I screeched, but Natsuki held his large hand out to me, undeterred.

“You’ll get used to it right away if you just try it,” he said.

I hurriedly slapped it away. But his hand came at me again, and I desperately fought off that attack too. Natsuki stretched out his hand *again*, learning nothing from experience. This time I dealt a counterblow. Stretch out hand, slap hand, stretch out hand, slap hand...our fight was like two cats batting at each other as they played. It went on almost forever.

“You’re so stubborn. When you resist me that much, it makes me want to take your hand if it’s the last thing I do!”

“What are you, a pervert?!”

“Of course not. I just want to tease you because your reactions are so cute.”

“M-moron! Don’t say weird stuff like that!” After I’d hurled this insult at him, I spun around so he wouldn’t see how hard I was blushing.

*What’s the deal with him? What did he just say? That I was **cute**? How can he say such embarrassing stuff so matter-of-factly?!*

When I’d walked away, my mind reeling with confusion, Natsuki ran up to me with a smile on his face. “Wait, wait, I’m sorry. I went a little too far.”

“Don’t follow me, you sadistic super-perv!”

“You call me a sadist just for *that*?” he said, sounding amazed.

“Izumi, you’re a little naïve.”

“Shut up,” I spat.

Sure, fine, compared to him I was 100% pure naïveté. Up until now, I’d never gone out with anyone before, and I was a virgin, obviously. Overwhelmed with such agonizing shame, I could pass out. I speed-walked to a nearby fast food place and dove inside.



The restaurant was bustling with families, couples, and what looked like groups of students, maybe because it was the weekend. Face still burning, I left our order up to Natsuki and went straight to look for a table. I couldn't stand the smell of cigarettes, so I circuited the nonsmoking section and snatched up an open table I found near the exit.

"Whew." I leaned against the back of my seat, and a deep sigh escaped me unbidden. I was really tired, somehow—yet another thing Natsuki was completely to blame for.

I mean, what the heck is his deal, anyway? First he says "Let's go out," then "Let's go on a date," then on top of that "Let's hold hands"? Isn't this going overboard, even for someone who feels sorry for me? Sheesh, I totally don't get this.

"Sorry I took so long."

As I cradled my aching head in my hands, Natsuki came up to me with a tray heaped with burgers, fries, and drinks. I kept my eyes trained on his face as he divided the food. But no matter how carefully I observed, there was no way to figure out how he felt. Just as I was forced to acknowledge once again that he was infuriatingly good-looking, Natsuki raised his head and our eyes met. After starting a little in surprise at my gaze, his eyes crinkled and he gave a small smile.

Oh God, look at that expression. Cut it out, idiot! When someone that gorgeous smiles at a person, their heart starts thumping even if they're not interested!

"Wh-what? I'll pay for my share. How much was it?" I quickly searched my pockets for my wallet to hide my confusion.

"Naw, it's my treat. I'm the one who asked you out, after all."

"Quit treating me like a girl." I took six hundred yen out of my wallet and shoved the coins toward him, saying "Keep the change."

Natsuki stuffed them into his wallet with a wry laugh and sat down across from me. But for some reason, he was still laughing a

little under his breath.

"You haven't changed, have you?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You're as stubborn as ever, and you still love fish burgers. It makes me happy, somehow."

It took me a moment to respond. His words had been unexpected, and I was pretty taken aback. "I'm surprised you remember that."

It was true, I'd always liked fish burgers, and I always ended up ordering them at fast food places. But I'd never imagined Natsuki would remember that.

"You order the same thing every time, Izumi. That makes it pretty tough to forget. Your drink is a Coke every time, too, and you always put mustard sauce on your nuggets, am I right?" Natsuki said gleefully after inhaling a few fries.

When he put it that way, it gave me mixed feelings. He made it sound like I was a really simple person.

"You got a problem with that?" I glared at him and tore into my fish burger angrily.

"So, what should we do today? If you don't have anything in mind, maybe we could go where I want?"

"Fine, but where do you want to go?"

"Let's just say you'll find out when you get there. There's something I wanted to show you." Natsuki smiled impishly.

The enigmatic way he said this sparked my curiosity, but no matter how I prodded him, I couldn't even get a hint. I felt pretty uncertain about the whole thing, but in the end, I fell silent with a feeling of resignation.

"Okay then, let's go. First we'll go back to the station," Natsuki said.

After we finished eating lunch, Natsuki urged me toward the station. I followed his instructions, buying a ticket and getting on an outbound train.

After watching the scenery flow by for half an hour without

talking much, we got off and I was shoved into a bus in front of the station.

I was unfamiliar with this area, and I couldn't even guess where the hell he meant to take me. Natsuki still wouldn't tell me, either. Whenever I stole a glance at him, he was just smiling, looking like he was having fun.

"Izumi, do you feel okay? I know you get carsick pretty easily."

"Don't talk like you're my mom; it's grossing me out." I scowled at him, annoyed. Sheesh, just how much did this guy remember about me? I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little pleased, but it made me feel kind of shy, or more fidgety somehow.

I wonder what this feeling is? It's sort of like nostalgia—oh, I get it. We haven't sat next to each other like this since grade school.

"Say, we had seats next to each other in fourth grade, didn't we?" Natsuki said, as if reading my mind.

"Yeah," I replied after a pause. "That was back when you still had some charm."

Natsuki laughed a little. "I was a shy kid, but you always took good care of me, Izumi." He squinted his eyes, like he was looking off into the distance. There was no trace in his profile of the quiet little boy he'd been, the classic over-protected weakling who'd called me "Sho."

He spoke quietly, looking straight ahead. "I'm glad I got to see you today, Izumi. I've always wanted to talk with you again like we did back then." His voice was low and a little lonely.

I gazed at him, at a loss. I'd immediately opened my mouth to deliver my usual spiteful retort, but the words stuck in my throat. While I was still searching for a response, there was an announcement over the loudspeaker and the bus came to a stop.

"Izumi, time to get off."

"Huh? Oh, right."

When Natsuki prodded my shoulder, I stood up next to him.

When we got off the train with the other departing passengers, we were standing in front of a big plaza. On the other side of it I could see a gate with fantastic decorations.

"Is this...an amusement park?"

"Yep, that's right. You didn't figure it out on the way here?"

"Well, excuse me. I was spaced out on the bus." I looked around as if to confirm where we were. It was a local theme park that had been around for ages.

Its name was "Happy Flower Park." It didn't have any of the latest attractions, but it always saw a pretty good turnout on weekends, since it wasn't far from Tokyo proper. That day, I saw a lot of families and couples heading for the gate, and I heard the sound of merry voices coming from inside the park.

"You chose a pretty clichéd place," I said after a moment.

"Hey, you can't go wrong with the classics." Natsuki's face was serious, but the way he said it made it sound like an excuse.

Even if this was a classic date spot, I never would've thought he'd choose it for a boy-boy date. It was my fault for letting him pick, but I wasn't too keen on the idea, anyway. Two guys going to an amusement park alone was pretty harsh, like on the level of a penalty game or something.

But the boy standing next to me was in such high spirits that I couldn't bring myself to say anything, so I gathered up my resolve and walked toward the gate. We bought our park admissions and tickets for the attractions at the ticket window. Then we entered the park, where we were greeted by its bunny mascot.

This park had a "garden" theme, and there were flowerbeds everywhere we looked, resplendent seasonal flowers in bloom. Even the benches and the info boards had flower motifs. It really was a flower-land.

"It looks like a fairy-tale."

It was so unbearable I wanted to turn around and make a break for it right then. However, Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky was saying, "The cuteness is so relaxing, huh?"

Sure, maybe it was relaxing if you were with a girl, but with two guys I knew it'd just be lame.

"So is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Oh, that's inside the park. Let's go—I think we're right on time."

Natsuki smiled like a kid about to show off a treasure and started walking. We passed through "Pansy Path," going all the way down the winding, twisting road that always came up in fairy tales. Then my field of vision suddenly expanded. We were in an outdoor theater. In the wide-open space before us was a big stage with some seating fanned out around it. There were already a lot of spectators packing into the place, and boisterous voices could be heard all around.

"Izumi, let's sit over there."

"Huh? Hey..."

Natsuki pushed me from behind and then forcibly sat me down in an empty seat nearby. Around us were nothing but families, and as two men, alone, we stuck out. I got embarrassed and glared at Natsuki, but he just smiled and said in a soothing voice, "It won't be long now."

What the hell is this guy's goal, anyway? Does he get off on embarrassing me?

As I pondered this idea in earnest, loud background music suddenly rang out, and a young woman carrying a microphone appeared in the center of the stage.

"Hello out there, all you good boys and girls!" the miniskirted chick shouted, and the kids and their deep-voiced fathers shouted "Hello!" back.

"Thanks for coming to Happy Flower Park today! Are you all having FUN?"

When she cupped her hand to her ear, lively voices cried out "Yeah!"

I snuck a glance at the guy next to me. Natsuki was smiling brightly as ever, eyes trained on the stage. I wondered if it was the

girl he was after. True, she was pretty cute, but I thought she was a little too old for him.

"I'm so glad you're having a good time! But you know what? I heard some REALLY bad guys just snuck into our peaceful Happy Flower Park. They're scary people who like to kidnap good little children...oh no, what's *that*!?"

No sooner had the voice from the microphone tensed up than the until-now tranquil background music grew frantic. It looked like something was about to happen. The air around us was charged with tension, and the kids in the audience were as scared as the chick on stage. I'd begun the show clueless as to what it was even about, but the mood was contagious, and even my heart started pounding.

The next moment a sudden explosive sound echoed through the air, and the curtains behind the chick opened to reveal a suspicious-looking group of about ten people in red unitards.

Before the chick could scream, I was already shouting, "It's the mysterious Chariot of Fire Men!" I'd seen them a million times. They were the lowest bad guys on the totem pole in my current favorite show, *Buddhist Prayer Rangers: Monkman*.

All of a sudden I was excited, too. I pitched forward, my eyes glued to the stage. The bad guys were running around nimbly, doing back flips and making a fool out of the chick running around trying to escape.

"Nooooo!" she screamed shrilly when they finally caught her. "Let me go, you perverts! This is sexual harassment!" The kids in the audience broke into a chorus of angry shouts.

I didn't shout, naturally, but I felt the same way they did. I clenched my fists and glared at the bad guys as they threatened the chick, saying things like "Give us your money!" and "Hand over your credit cards!" Intellectually, I knew this was a show, but their playful performances were strangely good, and they were sparking my anger for real.

"Stop it! I'm just a poor, ordinary citizen! Someone help meeeeeeeee!"

Just then, as that scream that somehow made me less eager to save her rang through the air, without warning, dry ice shrouded the stage in mist, and the frantic music was replaced by the solemn chanting of the Buddha's name.

Shaken by this sign of an ominous new presence, the bad guys looked around nervously. Meanwhile, the audience all quieted down at once. Everyone knew this tense silence was in expectation of the heroes' eagerly awaited arrival.

A beautiful, cultivated voice suddenly rang out from the speakers. "The heavens know us, the earth knows us, we know us, and the people know us...Heaven's vengeance is slow but sure! We are the ones who will purge this world of all villainy!"

The mist became even thicker, as if a cloud had fallen down from the sky. In its center, I could see the clear outlines of five shadowy figures. I gulped. At some point, my tightly clenched fists had started to sweat.

"O ye foolish demons ruled by earthly desires. You threaten the innocent and try to rob them of their money. On behalf of the Buddha, we'll straighten out that vile disposition of yours!" Just as the sharp voice shot through the theater, the smoke on the stage whirled up violently from its center and vanished.

And so the five warriors appeared.

They all stood there—from left to right, Monk Blue, Monk Yellow, Monk Red, Monk Green, and Monk Pink—wearing their battle costumes that looked like priests' stoles.

Seeing those gallant figures, the audience went wild and roared with applause. I was clapping right along with them. It was awesome. It was seriously awesome. It was totally *Monkman*! Everything from their trademark pose to each character's individual mannerisms was dead-on!

I was so deeply impressed, I felt thrilled right down to my toes. When the fight between the Monkman team and the bad guys started, I completely forgot myself and started cheering. Those few minutes were just like a dream.



Full-scale action you'd never think could come out of a little theme park event like this was unfolding on stage, and by the time it ended the show was a total hit, even as we laughed at the MC chick's ham acting along the way.

My excitement lingered for a pretty long time, and I remained stock-still in my seat even after most of the audience had left. So it took me a while to realize that Natsuki was staring at me, smiling.

"What, is there something on my face?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing." There was something cryptic about the way he tilted his head.

Oh, that's right. I totally forgot about this guy, but come to think of it, he's been here the whole time, huh? Which means he saw me getting so excited just now.

Whoa, this was bad. I was seriously embarrassed. My face was steadily growing red. "Wh-what's that supposed to mean? If you've got something to say, just spit it out."

"But you'll get mad if I tell you, you know."

"I won't get mad, so just say it."

"Well, okay, then: You were as excited as a little kid, and it was really cute."

"Who are you calling a kid?!"

I yelled at him not to make fun at me, and with a wry laugh he said, "See? You did get angry...but it looks like you enjoyed it, so I'm glad. It was pretty fun, huh?"

"Y-yeah, I guess it was all right," I answered, looking away.

Really, it had been a blast, and I felt grateful to Natsuki for bringing me there, but I felt like if I told him that, he'd win. Although maybe if he hadn't made fun of me by saying I was acting like a kid, I could've been more honest about my feelings.

But my childish answer was enough to satisfy Natsuki, because he was smiling and looking relieved. Watching him be mature like that made me really feel like a stupid brat. "It was fun, thanks," I mumbled grudgingly after a moment.

Natsuki widened his eyes in surprise, and then scratched his

head, looking shy. "You're welcome. Heh, I guess looking high and low for someplace I thought you'd like was worth it."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. Say, aren't you thirsty?" he asked hurriedly. "There was a drink stand over there; let's go back." He grabbed my arm and pulled me up.

He was still holding on as we walked back. At first I was spacing out and didn't really notice, but eventually I came back to my senses with a start and tried to shake his hand off. But no matter how long I shook my arm, Natsuki refused to let go. I flailed even more wildly, pissed off.

"Hey!"

"What?"

"What?" my ass. Let go of me."

"Can't we stay like this a little longer?"

All of a sudden, Natsuki's grip tightened just a little. He was staring at me intently. His eyes had this weirdly serious light in them. Flustered, I looked away. My heart abruptly started to pound, and my back was clammy with sweat where the sun shone down on it.

Natsuki was silent. He could've said "I'm kidding," right away and been done with it, but time stretched on and still he didn't say it. If that's how he was going to be, I could've just told him to fuck off, but that strange nervousness had frozen my throat, and I couldn't get my voice to work at all.

Why am I so uncomfortable just because someone's hanging onto my arm?

When I didn't say anything for a while, Natsuki let go of me. "Sorry," he said apologetically. "Did I tease you too much?"

"Huh?"

"Your reaction was so funny, I just couldn't resist. Come on, I'll buy you something to drink to apologize."

Now those were the words I'd been waiting for.

I nodded stiffly, but relief wasn't the first emotion to wash over me—the first one was disappointment. The question of *what I*

was disappointed about freaked me out all over again.

"I'm really sorry," Natsuki said, laughing at how flustered I looked.

I was immediately pissed off. Maybe it was because he'd done it while I was already feeling high-strung, but for some reason it was just cruelly sad that he'd teased me so glibly, and before I knew it I'd taken off running.

"I-Izumi?!" I heard Natsuki's alarmed voice call after me.

I upped my speed, paying no attention to him. I had no idea where I was or where I was running to, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get away from Natsuki, fast.

"Izumi, wait! What's wrong?!"

"Shut up! Don't come after me!"

Natsuki was stubbornly following me, and somehow we were suddenly playing tag at a full-out sprint. But I was no match for Natsuki. He was on the track team, and I wasn't even playing sports these days. On top of that, I kept almost running into people—guys in animal costumes, random passersby, you name it—and each time I'd reel aside and lose speed. Pretty soon Natsuki was closing in on me.

"Hey, I'm sorry, really. Please stop. We can't even talk like this!"

When I looked behind me, I saw him running in beautiful form, not even a hitch in his breathing. Seeing how easy this was for him really pissed me off, and I pumped my arms, trying to go faster. But I was out of energy, and it wasn't even five minutes before my legs started to drag and I finally stumbled to a stop. Natsuki came up to me moments later as I leaned against an info board and tried to catch my breath.

"You're as fast as ever, Izumi. I was afraid you were going to get away from me."

The complete absence of sweat on his perfectly sculpted forehead belied his admiring words. He was watching me with a look of mixed worry and relief.

"What is that, sarcasm? You're not even breathing hard."

"That's because I'm being put through the paces at practice every day. But I'd rather not run any further."

"I don't have any strength left."

I collapsed onto a nearby bench. Natsuki sat down next to me. I ignored him and took deep breaths in and out. The wind felt nice and cool.

Natsuki had narrowed his own eyes and was staring up at the clear blue sky. "Izumi," he said after a while. "It's my fault you quit the track team, isn't it?"

Taken aback by the sudden question, I floundered for a while before shaking my head. "No..."

My first year of middle school, I was on the track team. Back then, I was the fastest short-distance runner of all the underclassmen. Natsuki ran in the same events I did, and everybody had pretty high hopes for him, but I'd never lost to him. And *that* made me want to throw my heart and soul into track even more. Natsuki beat me at everything else in life, so short-distance running was the one thing propping up my pride.

But not long after we advanced to second year, I quit the track team. The reason was because I'd run against Natsuki in the 100-meter dash, and lost for the first time. I was pretty sure that if I ever explained that to someone, they'd tell me it was a stupid reason to quit. But for me, it was the most definitive reason there could be.

"I did it! I beat you for the first time, Izumi!"

When the fateful match was over, Natsuki turned to me and smiled, looking really happy. There was no way he could've known that his smile plunged me into the depths of despair. Mortification, loneliness, sadness, the sting of defeat. A thousand emotions passed through my heart in an instant, and then I was just pathetic. When I got home, I crawled into bed and cried all night. The next day, I resigned from the team.

Years later, I still relived that pain every so often.

I took a deep breath and calmed myself down. I felt a little

gross, maybe because I hadn't run at full steam in a while. After I gritted my teeth against the urge to vomit, Natsuki started peering at me worriedly.

"Are you okay, Izumi? Are you sick?"

"Shut up. It's nothing, so leave me alone. Looking at your face will make me feel even sicker."

Natsuki's shapely eyebrows drew together at this characteristically harsh response.

Did I make him angry? Nah, no way. No matter how nasty I am to this guy, he just smiles that troubled smile. Nothing I do or say would ever shake him up. That's how insignificant I am to him.

Seriously, I was stupid for being so self-conscious when I knew I wasn't even on his radar. I wanted to announce that I was going home right then and there, but I was too afraid I'd start sobbing.

I sighed, and then started walking away without looking back. I didn't want to hang around this damn festive amusement park anymore. I'd had a great time at the *Monkman* show, but now I was embarrassed just remembering how excited I'd been.

I picked up the pace, as if running away, but just then Natsuki rushed after me and grabbed my arm. "Hey! Where are you going?"

"Home." I said the word too quickly for my voice to have the chance to tremble.

I could feel Natsuki's uncertainty through the hand gripping my arm. The air between us grew strained, and then he nodded heavily. "Okay." He started walking, pulling me along with him.

I'd assumed we were heading to the exit, but for some reason we ended up at the Ferris wheel. It was a nice big one considering the size of the park, and each gondola was painted with flowers like tulips and daisies. The park as a whole was very fairy-tale, but this ride was especially cute and colorful.

While I was gaping uncomprehendingly at the giant structure that had suddenly appeared in front of me, Natsuki pushed me into a gondola that had just arrived at the loading gate.

Surprised, I tried to turn around, but by then it was too late. The girl running the ride had shut the door tight, and the gondola started moving up toward the sky.

"Okay, now we can talk."

When I turned to look at him, Natsuki was sitting on one of the fixed benches and smiling a self-satisfied smile.

"Like hell. I've got nothing to say to you!"

"Come on, sit down. It'll be a while before we get back down to the ground."

"And whose fault is that?!" I was just working myself up to a good shouting fit when a horribly calm voice called my name.

"Izumi."

Natsuki was sitting with his legs spread apart a little, staring fixedly at me. He looked so serious that I grudgingly sat down on the bench across from his. But no matter how long I waited, he didn't say a word.

We'd gone up a good ways, because when I looked down at the ground, the merry-go-round and the teacup ride looked like miniatures. At this height, I could even see the words spelled out by the flowerbeds, and the blossoms created by the tiles in the square. It was a great view. But I wasn't looking at the fairy-tale flowerland drenched in sunlight. I was looking at the hazy reflection of Natsuki's face in the window.

Not that I was concerned about him, or anything. But somehow, my eyes kept going back to him. He was bowing his head a little, like he was mulling something over. Natsuki was a decisive guy whose mind worked quickly, so it was rare to see him hesitate this much.

I gazed at the translucent Natsuki in the window long after I should've gotten bored with it. I felt like I was being sucked in. His face was as handsome as ever. Watching him, I felt my irritation slipping away.

"Izumi, did it bother you when I touched you before?"

"No, not really," I said dismissively. I wasn't bothered that

he'd touched me; I was sad that he'd teased me. I still felt depressed inside, and I sighed without thinking. I hated what a sissy I was, sniveling about a stupid thing like this.

"I was just pissed off at you for acting weird. I hate that kind of joke."

"So then, if it hadn't been a joke, and I was serious, it would've been okay?"

I glared at him. He was messing with me two seconds after I'd said I hated his jokes! "Are you trying to pick a fight here?"

With a crooked smile, Natsuki hurriedly apologized. But it was a weak smile somehow, and after it slowly faded from his face, he sighed deeply.

"Anyway, I'm sorry I carried the joke too far, but I didn't invite you here today to tease you. I wanted to talk, just you and me. I mean, I've caused you a lot of trouble."

"I told you, forget about it and just leave me alone. Things get even more complicated when you're involved."

"I know that. But I hate this. I don't care what the other guys say—I want to hang out with you like this, and I want to talk with you. I want to be with you, just like we were before, Izumi."

Natsuki said this with such earnest passion I was totally disarmed, and I forgot to hurl any of the usual insults. Maybe it was partly because we were alone in our gondola that I could listen to him with good grace like this. Without my pride rearing its ugly head, I could feel happy at his words, and my heart fluttered. Warmth slowly built up in my cheeks and my chest, and I couldn't stop fidgeting on my seat.

When I glanced up at Natsuki, he was staring at the ground and clearing his throat self-consciously.

If it's going to embarrass you, don't say it in the first place, moron.

"Um, anyway, maybe that was overblown, but it's what I really think. So when you said 'go out with me,' it made me happy. I mean, I was so sure you hated me."

"That was..." I began, and then hesitated. I'd only told him to go out with me to harass him, but by now I'd totally lost the energy for it. "Just so you know, I didn't mean anything weird by that."

"Yeah, I know. You were harassing me, right? I was still happy, though. After all, it gave me the chance to talk to you." He gave me a lonely smile. It sounded like he'd seen right through my shallow thinking, so I was a little embarrassed. After that, we both fell quiet, and the gondola came back to earth in silence.

When I said I still wanted to go home, this time Natsuki didn't argue. We walked through the park gates with most of our ride tickets still in our pockets, rode the bus and then the train, and arrived back at the local station.

When the time came to say our goodbyes, Natsuki started trying to escort me back to my place. "Are you sure you don't want me to take you home?"

"I already told you no, so stop pestering me."

"But you have no sense of direction."

"Look, quit remembering all the unflattering stuff about me! Even I'm not going to get lost in my own neighborhood."

"Well, okay, if you say so..." Natsuki nodded, smiling crookedly.

Huh, so after all that pushiness, he just backs down...wait, what am I thinking? That makes it sound like I don't want to leave him.

I shook my head to clear it of this terrifying thought, spat out a "Later!" and turned away.

"Hey, Izumi!"

Before I'd taken a single step, Natsuki called after me to stop, snatching me by the wrist.

"So...um. It's okay for us to talk and hang out again like before...right?"

"Uh..." Unsure how to respond, I scratched my head.

Natsuki's eyes were begging. His expression was so tense that I couldn't help but wonder why he should be so desperate about

something like this. I was so awed by his intensity that before I realized it, I was giving a small nod.

"Thanks," Natsuki said, expression still soft. His grin was swift and happy. That silly, flushed-faced smile looked really pleased, and it surprised me. He relaxed his grip on my wrist, slipping his hand down to squeeze mine.

A little sound escaped my lips, and he let go as if he were running away.

I feel like the way he held my hand just now was kind of weird. He didn't just grab it like you would for a handshake; it was like he was trying to link our fingers.

When I looked up at Natsuki, unsettled, he just tilted his head to the side and gave me an inquiring look, as if nothing had happened. It was anticlimactic, but I was relieved to know that it was just my imagination. I was being sensitive because of all that had happened. I mean, my heart was still jumping every time I looked at him.

"Later, then," Natsuki said.

"Right, see you." I gave a little wave, and Natsuki waved back in response. The cheek-splitting grin he wore and the way he waved were just the same as they were back in elementary school, and I smiled without thinking. In that moment, my mind jumped back to my memories of fifth grade.

If I really thought about it, I'd probably started getting so stubborn around the time that Natsuki started directing that smile at other people. I didn't like that he treated me, his best friend, the same as these tagalongs who'd butted in later.

It was stupid, childish pride, but at the time, it had really stung. And I'd been stubborn ever since, without a chance to patch things up with him. But now that I'd talked to Natsuki for the first time in a while, I felt like some of the weight had been taken off my mind.

I looked up at the sky and sighed. The wind caressed my cheeks pleasantly as it blew by.

After that, I gradually started to talk with Natsuki more.

For instance, if I saw him in the classroom in the morning, I'd give a little "Morning." If I passed him in the hallway, I'd call out a "Yo." And on my way home I'd say, "See you tomorrow."

They were just trivial conversations that didn't last more than two sentences, but still, considering how things had been, it was major progress. After all, up until a little while ago, I'd ignored Natsuki every time he greeted me, and he hadn't paid too much attention to me either, maybe in deference to my feelings and the hostility of his groupies.

But there was one thing I had to be very careful about for us to have these conversations. I had to make sure I didn't badmouth Natsuki. We agreed on this one day after school down by the garbage cans behind the building, in a conversation that went something like this:

"What, do I have to fawn all over you like your little entourage now?"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. I wouldn't mind anything you said to me, and you can let me have it all you want when we're alone. But if you say that stuff when everyone else is around, you know they'll start criticizing you again. And if I stick up for you, things get worse."

"True, but...okay, fine. I'll try not to push it when other people are around."

I didn't like having chummy conversations with Natsuki, since they made me feel like I'd become one of his groupies, but it'd be a pain in the ass to get hassled every time I opened my mouth.

And mysteriously, after a week of playing nice had gone by, the Natsuki-badmouthing that had been like second nature to me didn't happen unless I actively thought about it.

As a result, I was hardly bickering with Natsuki's entourage at all anymore. Matsuno still glared at me, but he wasn't interested in picking a fight. Tagawa was happy I'd quieted down, and he sometimes came and talked to me.

Natsuki watched all of this with a smile that said; “I told you so.” Sure, peace was a good thing, but I wasn’t sure I liked this—it felt like he was manipulating me.

I told Natsuki this on the phone one night.

“Well, it doesn’t sound like we can ever totally get rid of that sharp tongue,” he said, with an amazed laugh. This made me sulk even more.

Yeah, fine, I know I’m warped.

“So, are you free tomorrow?”

“Huh?” I was lying on my bed with the phone, and when Natsuki asked me this I remembered that tomorrow was Sunday. “I don’t really have any plans, why?”

“Exams are coming up soon. So why don’t you come over to my place and study with me?”

“Man, talk about a depressing thing to say...” I groaned, scratching my head. “A study session, huh?”

I hadn’t been over to Natsuki’s house since elementary school. It made me feel shy somehow, and I was afraid if I wasn’t terse enough with him, I might soften into a smile. “Sure. I’ll head over after lunch, about one o’clock.”

“Okay. See you then.”

“Uh-huh.” I answered him briefly and then started to hang up, when I heard a soft little laugh from the other end of the phone.

“What’s with that laugh? It was creepy.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing,” Natsuki rushed to assure me.

Sure didn’t sound like nothing, though...

“It really pisses me off how you do that.”

He laughed. “I actually like that warped attitude of yours, though.”

“What do you—?”

“See you tomorrow.” He hung up before I could ream him out.

Frustrated at being cut off before I’d said all I’d wanted to, I heaved a sigh and flung myself back down on the bed.

I didn’t know if it was because deep down I still had this image of Natsuki as the meek person he used to be, but sometimes he threw me way off balance. When he messed with me, it confused me to a degree that surprised me. But it wasn’t unpleasant. In fact, recently, I’d started looking forward to Natsuki’s texts and phone calls. I was kind of disgusted with myself (I mean, I’d been so stubborn for so long! What had happened?), but I couldn’t help feeling excited.

I’m like a girl waiting to hear from the boy she likes.

“Wait, what am I thinking?!”

That absurd comparison put me in a bad mood. Sure, I hadn’t gotten to visit Natsuki’s place in a long time, but I was getting too keyed up about it. It’s not like I’m going to my girlfriend’s house for the first time or anything... no, wait, that’s a weird comparison, too.

I bounded off the bed and went over to my desk, opening up my English textbook to try to change my mood. *If I’m gonna study with Natsuki, I’m gonna make sure I can keep up.* I’d be pretty lame if I had to get him to explain everything to me, after all, and even I wanted to show off a little.

But at some point during my pride-driven studying, I fell asleep—when my eyes popped open again, the hands on the clock read 12:30.

“Huh...? Gah! Seriously?!”

I shot to my feet in a panic and paced around the room in anxious circles, like a caged bear. *Natsuki’s place is about ten minutes away by bike, so if I brush my teeth, wash my face, change my clothes, and get ready all at hyper-speed...okay, I think I can pull it off.*

Mind made up, I launched out of the room like a rocket and zoomed through the tasks on my mental to-do list. By the time I left home with my bed hair not quite tamed down, it was already 12:50. I jumped on my bike and pedaled ferociously, shooting through the neighborhood like an Olympic cyclist to Natsuki’s house, where I hadn’t been in five or six years.

Natsuki's family was pretty well off, and their house was big, too. When you stood in front of it, the first thing you saw was a little gate, and beyond that a two-story Japanese-style house. It was a pretty old building, but every part of it was in perfect repair, and I'd been told that sometimes people asked to photograph it. Even I could understand why they would want to—the house had this intense old-fashioned Japanese charm to it.

There was one problem with this magnificent house, though. It was inevitable considering how old the place was, but it didn't have an intercom to announce yourself like a modern house would. After stopping my bike at the gate, I stood in front of the entryway with its latticed door for a while, unsure what to do. Some people might think it was silly to get so anxious just because there wasn't a doorbell, but at high school age, it would be majorly embarrassing to just shout, "Hey, Natsuki, want to play?"

Just when I'd hit on the genius idea of calling him on his cell, the latticed door in front of me suddenly flung open, and I jumped back wildly.

"Oh, Izumi, I thought that was you. I heard a bike stopping in front of the house and figured it must be. But what are you doing standing around here?"

"U-Uh, nothing..."

"Oh? Well, never mind, come on in."

At his urging I went inside, politely calling out a greeting. Natsuki peered at my flushed face, looking worried. "Wow, you're really sweating."

"Well, excuse me. I overslept."

"You really didn't have to rush so hard. You're sure Mr. Conscientious, huh? Or were you just that eager to see me?"

"Enough with that kind of joke. You're making my skin crawl."

"Oh, so I was right."

I turned a full-powered glare on him and he immediately bowed his head contritely.

"I'm sorry, I apologize."

Still frowning sullenly, I grabbed Natsuki's head and turned it to face the other direction in a silent demand that he hurry up and show me to his room.

"That hurts," he complained.

I pretended not to hear him. I didn't want him to turn around and see me blushing.

"Izumi, did I make you angry for real?"

"I'm not angry."

"Then why aren't you saying anything?" he asked, sounding uneasy. But no way was I going to tell him that I was as nervous as a kid looking forward to a field trip.

After winding through a series of hallways, Natsuki stopped in front of the house's easternmost room. Its sliding door was painted with magnificent pine trees. I finally let go of Natsuki's head, and he opened the door with a look of relief.

"Wait here, I'll go get us something to drink. Tea okay?"

"Yeah, anything's fine."

After he led me inside, Natsuki went back down the hallway in the direction we'd come from. Left behind alone, I stood in the middle of the room and looked around me. It was a Japanese-style room about eight tatami mats in size, and spotlessly clean with everything perfectly in its place, too. It was as if the room was an expression of Natsuki's personality. In one corner was a stair step-style chest of drawers, the kind you didn't see very often these days; a lamp with a paper shade sat on top of it providing indirect light. His desk was old-fashioned and simple. The atmosphere of the whole room was classic enough to make you wonder whether you'd somehow stumbled into the Showa era.

There was a low, well-used dining table in the center of the room, maybe set there for his study session with me. I sat down on one of the cushions next to it and finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Some people were shy around strangers, but here I'd been acting shy around a *room*. Yet, as I breathed in the fresh, raw scents

of wood and tatami, more and more memories of the old days came back to me.

Back when Natsuki and I were still friends, we used to constantly climb up that chest of drawers and jump off, getting ourselves scolded by his mom. And we used draw pictures at that table. We used to have all kinds of fun here. It was always just the two of us, and I considered myself the boss, so I gave Natsuki all kinds of orders.

Man, I feel really nostalgic.

While my thoughts were wandering, Natsuki came back carrying a tray with teacups and traditional snacks. He set it on the table and sat down.

"Here we are. I chose bean-jam buns for the snack, is that cool?"

"Sure, Mako, that's—"

I broke off mid-nod. Natsuki's "Huh?" came at the same time as my own. We stared at each other, eyes going wide.

What did I just say? "Mako" was the nickname I called him in elementary school!

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! F-forget that! That never happened!"

"Man, that brings back memories. You used to call me that, didn't you?"

"You can leave those memories forgotten!"

"What's the problem? You should start calling me that again, Sho." He gave me an evil grin. I immediately saw red, and reached across to clap my hand over his mouth, but Natsuki dodged me with ease and ended up capturing my hand instead. I flailed and struggled, but his arm didn't even twitch. Even worse, his eyes were crinkled in amusement.

"You've gotten bad-natured lately, haven't you?" I gave him my best glare.

"You think so? I think I'm just acting normal..."

"No, you've definitely gotten meaner. You never used to be this cheeky."

"Hey, I'm a guy. All guys have the urge to pick on the person they like."

I froze, staring at him openmouthed. My eyes must have been as wide as a deer caught in the headlights.

"Just kidding," he said, with an embarrassed laugh. It was a 'Whoops, that one missed the mark' sort of sound.

So that had been a joke. *Sheesh...* I thought, my shoulders slumping. Then I promptly cocked my head to the side and thought, *Wait, why did I just think 'Sheesh'?* When I contemplated this, I discovered I felt kind of depressed.

"Okay, let's eat and then start studying." Natsuki pushed me back into a sitting position in front of the table, and offered me the tea he'd brought.

I still felt a little dissatisfied with my conclusions, but in the end I decided not to ponder it too seriously. I wouldn't be able to figure out what was going on no matter how much I thought about it, and seeing my beloved bean jam buns set in front of me made hunger push any lingering doubts out of my mind.

So the two of us settled down and enjoyed a relaxing tea break. The blood sugar boost helped both psychologically and physically, and we were able to get some serious studying done. I was weak in math, and hated it to the point where the mere sight of an equation practically caused an allergic response. I didn't have a problem with any other subject, so math was the one thing that was dragging me down.

"...so therefore, $x = 8$. Get it now?"

"Uh..."

"Okay, so that was a little tough to understand. I'll explain it again."

When I had a problem I couldn't solve, Natsuki talked me through it until I got it, without a shadow of frustration crossing his face. Not only that, his explanations were thorough and easy to understand, and when I'd get discouraged halfway through, he'd encourage me with a cheerful smile and a "If you've gotten this far

with it, you can solve it.” It was pretty reassuring, and so I worked up the motivation to try harder.

I propped my chin on my hands, elbows resting on the table, and stole a glimpse at Natsuki’s profile. He was intently explaining a math problem, pointing at the textbook to illustrate his point.

He used to be so meek and wimpy! When did his face get so manly? Now he’s as dazzling and good-looking as a super hero.

As I gazed captivatedly at his clean-cut profile, Natsuki lifted his head, and our eyes met. He opened his mouth in surprise, and then suddenly blushed. I didn’t get why he was embarrassed at first, but the reason quickly became clear. Our faces were so close together we could bump noses any second.

“S-sorry!” Natsuki pulled back hastily, facing away from me and coughing.

Uh, you didn’t do anything wrong. Why would you apologize?

I didn’t know what to say, so I grabbed my eraser and unnecessarily rubbed out some formulas in my notebook. Now we were both silent, and a chill fell over the room. I felt extra aware of Natsuki, but I didn’t know how to start a conversation. It was an unsettling feeling. My heartbeat had even sped up.

Maybe Natsuki felt the same, because he was staring at the math book and his profile was frozen, lips pressed tightly together.

“H-hey, I just remembered something,” I said stiltedly. I dug around in my bag and pulled out a blue college notebook. “Can you give this to Tagawa for me?”

When I shoved it toward him, he blinked in confusion. “Sure, but...what is this, physics notes?”

“Yeah, you know he missed some school because of that cold. These are the notes from those days’ classes.”

“But how come you’re not giving it to him, Izumi?”

“It’s awkward talking to him myself. We haven’t been friends in a long time, after all.” I shrugged a little.

Physics was an elective. There weren’t that many students

taking it, and the teacher was infamous for bad explanations that made it hard to take coherent notes. Really, I thought I might just be butting my nose in where it wasn’t wanted, but on the other hand, the exam was coming up, and the material from those classes was going to be on it, so I wanted to help. Plus—though putting it this way made it seem like a bigger deal than it was—I meant the notes as a thank-you.

Lately, after I started talking with Tagawa more, I’d figured something out. He’d been pretty worried about me. So when he’d told me I was “pretty obnoxious,” what had sounded like an attack was actually meant as a warning.

Natsuki opened the notebook and began leafing through the pages. I couldn’t imagine it would be any fun to look at the notes for a class you weren’t taking, but he was scanning them intently. When he eventually reached the last page, he smiled and said, “You have nice handwriting.”

“Whatever,” I said shortly, embarrassed.

“You’re really nice, you know that Izumi? Doing something like this for Tagawa.”

“It’s not that big a deal. I’m just lending him notes I already put together.”

“But it’s still a kind gesture. I think you’re great for doing it.”

“What are you, an idiot?” I said angrily. “Flattery’s not gonna get you anywhere, you know.”

Sheesh, how can he say such embarrassing things so easily?

Natsuki was watching my pouting mouth and smiling softly. His smile was so natural, it tugged me out of my sulk and drew a little smile of my own in response. At that, Natsuki’s eyes glistened slightly, and he started slowly coming closer to me. He had long eyelashes for a guy. Those eyes were rapidly filling my field of vision, and they captivated me so much, I forgot to breathe. I also forgot to run away. My heart was pounding in my ears. Soon Natsuki’s nose brushed mine, and then...

The door suddenly flew open with a bang, and I recoiled in surprise. Three boys tumbled energetically into the room.

"Yo, Natsuki! We came to make sure you had some fun this weekend...huh?"

Matsuno was in the lead, and noticed me right away. "What are you doing here?" he asked, pointing at me. Tagawa and Kimura were behind him. But that was exactly what *I* wanted to know about *them*. I turned back to Natsuki in confusion, and saw he was staring wide-eyed. Maybe he hadn't expected them either.

"M-Matsuno? Guys...did we plan something for today?"

"No, nothing. But we're not just showing up and demanding dinner or anything. Test time is around the corner, right? And this round of exams is gonna cover lots of ground in every subject, so we're in serious trouble! So, we figured we'd come over here and get some help from our favorite teacher, Mr. Natsuki. Right, guys?" Matsuno looked behind him for support from the others, who nodded awkwardly.

"You should've at least called first. It's not exactly convenient for me if you just come over with no warning." Natsuki's voice didn't hide his irritation. It wasn't very often that Mr. Mild-Mannered let it show when he was peeved.

"S-sorry, Natsuki," Tagawa said hastily. "We shouldn't have barged in here without thinking about whether you were free." He darted an apologetic glance at me, too.

But Matsuno hadn't picked up on the strained atmosphere. He paid no attention when Tagawa tried to shepherd them all back home, and his apology was an offhand "Aw, what's the big deal?" He gestured to me. "You were studying with Izumi, right? So it's perfect timing."

"Well..." Natsuki fell silent, looking at me uncomfortably.

"But man, this is a surprise. I sure never expected to see you here, Izumi! You usually call Natsuki all kinds of names, but when you're in trouble you brazenly get his help, huh? You sure know how to get ahead in life."

"Cut it out, Matsuno. I invited Izumi here today."

"You're too nice, Natsuki. You know, if you don't get that soft heartedness under control, people like this are just going to use you and you're going to get hurt." He pointed to me when he said *people like this*, and I saw red. But I clenched my fists and kept myself under control. Matsuno was always saying crap. It would be a waste of time to take the bait. But—

"What, Izumi, nothing to say to that? Can't argue with the truth, is that it?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

"Ha! You're always such a creep. You're always mocking us with your little 'entourage' bit, but I see you're worming in on the sly. If we're Natsuki's entourage, what are you? His slave? His servant?" When Matsuno let this fly sarcastically with a sneering laugh thrown in for good measure, I reached my limit.

I flew at him and landed a punch on his right cheek. He responded right away with a blow to my jaw. There wasn't much force behind it, but it rattled my brain a little, and the world tilted. Staggering, I got ready for my second punch, but Natsuki grabbed me from behind, and the fist I'd launched at Matsuno hit nothing but air.

"Let me go, dammit!" I yelled.

"Izumi, calm down! I can understand why you're angry, but you have to stop."

"Like hell you understand!" I roared, spit flying from my mouth.

When I glanced in front of me, Matsuno was being held back by Tagawa. He was scowling fiercely as he struggled to get free. I guess he couldn't reign in his anger either, because he was glaring at me like I'd killed his father.

Natsuki desperately tried to calm me down, his arms still around me in a bear hug. "Matsuno's just got a sharp tongue. First let's put some ice on your jaw. Okay?"

In that moment, my heart froze. Matsuno had started it, but

Natsuki wouldn't take my side. All at once I was sad.

I'm the one who used to be closest to him, who used to be his best friend! And I thought lately Natsuki was starting to treat me so nicely, it was like we'd gone back to those days—was I the only one who felt that way?

Now I knew the cruel truth, and I could feel my heart turn to ice. My sadness about the distance between Natsuki and me was even deeper than my anger at Matsuno. I clenched my teeth, but I couldn't stop a tear from escaping. In Natsuki's surprise, he slackened the arms restraining me.

"This is stupid," I whispered, and then I shot past Matsuno and the others and out of the room.

I'm such a moron. The worst.

As I reeled headlong through the hallways, the only thing I could hear in my mind was self-mockery. I'd been misinterpreting all along. I'd been expecting so much of Natsuki, somewhere along the line I'd gotten carried away. I'd made fun of Natsuki's entourage so much, but somewhere deep inside me, I'd wanted to be the person most special to him.

"Izumi!"

I looked back toward the voice calling out for me to stop, and saw Natsuki running toward me. I freaked out and ran away even faster. But there were so many rooms in this house that the hallways were mazelike. I got lost and ended up at a dead end in front of a closet.

"I thought you'd be over here."

I tried to run the other way, but Natsuki was right there, and he stood in my path to block my escape route. I didn't say anything for a moment.

"What do you mean you thought I'd be here?" I finally said.

"Don't you remember? When we used to play hide-and-seek, you would hide in this closet all the time. So that was the one game that I always won."

Natsuki smiled a tiny smile, and softly laid a hand on my

cheek. Startled, I slapped it away. It was too late to hide the fact that my face was wet with tears, but having him look at me with pity—that, I couldn't stand.

"I'm really sorry about what happened," Natsuki mumbled. He was looking at the hand I'd slapped with a sad expression on his face.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Well..."

Before he could finish the sentence, Tagawa and the others' voices drifted toward us from somewhere in one of the hallways. They were looking for Natsuki. I listened intently, and realized their footsteps were getting closer. Then Natsuki abruptly opened the closet door and shoved me inside.

"H-hey!"

"Shh! Quiet."

Natsuki crammed himself inside, too, and then he shut the door, so that it was pitch-dark. There was a lot of stuff in the closet: brooms, laundry supplies, toilet paper, all kinds of things. It was a cramped little closet to begin with, and with two guys and all that stuff inside, there was hardly a centimeter of space to spare. Thanks to that, I ended up plastered to Natsuki's chest while he stood with his back pressed up against the door.

"Hey, what the hell are you..." My protest was cut off when Natsuki's hand clapped over my mouth.

Natsuki was standing perfectly still, listening intently to the noise from outside. Soon multiple people's footsteps came right up to the closet, but after we heard Tagawa say "They're not over here," their voices drifted farther and farther away.

Natsuki took his hand away from my mouth when all was quiet outside. "We're good now."

I started to say something, but then I thought Natsuki might say something first, so I waited. But he stayed silent.

Our skin was warm where it lightly pressed together. It was too hot in the closet, because we were both sweating slightly.

We're so close together, it's practically like he's hugging me...

The moment this thought popped into my head, a strange feeling welled up inside me. It was like my heart was trapped in a vise, like I was set astir, like I wanted to just open my mouth and shout something, and lash out, and clutch hold of Natsuki and cling to him for dear life—a really strange impulse.

Panicked, I shook my head to clear it. But the tumult in my heart wouldn't settle down, and my pulse was racing faster and faster. Natsuki chose that moment to suddenly grab my arms, and I let out a shrill cry before I could stop myself.

"I'm sorry those guys said such awful things. I'm really sorry I couldn't protect you like I should've." In his low whisper I could hear frustration and anger at himself, but I couldn't bring myself to forgive him so easily.

"If it bothers you so much, you should've taught them better in the first place."

"...I know. I'm sorry."

Hearing him apologize so readily made it rankle even more, and without thinking I let my voice and gaze both get sharper. "You are such a moron, you know? Why do you pick guys like *that* to hang out with? I know you way better than those clowns. So why won't you..."

I came back to my senses mid-rant.

What was I about to say just now? I wasn't actually thinking; I was mostly just talking on sheer momentum.

All the blood drained from my cheeks, and then surged back the next moment and set them blazing. Still confused, I tried to leave the closet, but Natsuki pulled me powerfully back by the arm.

"Hey, what were you about to say?"

"N-nothing," I said. I tried to jerk free, but Natsuki's grip didn't relax a bit.

"You liar. I know you were going somewhere with that sentence."



"I'm telling you, it's no big deal!"

"Izumi!" he yelled sharply.

I stiffened. I'd almost never heard Natsuki raise his voice like that. And no matter what I said to him, the worst he'd ever done was look a little pained. But now...

"Come on, please, tell me..." He sensed my alarm, and his voice went soft and trembling as he pleaded with me. I couldn't see his face, but I knew without a doubt that his expression was dead earnest. That's how tense he was.

But I couldn't give him an answer. My mouth had been moving without any orders from my brain, so even I wasn't completely sure how I'd meant to finish the sentence.

Natsuki was listening intently for whatever I'd say next, his burning-hot hands still gripping me. He was so frantic it scared me. All I could do was look down and say nothing.

The silence stretched on until he finally said "Fine," in a voice somewhere between a mutter and a sigh. "I was going to let you slide, but I've changed my mind. I'm going to interpret your feelings the way that suits me best, okay?"

"Huh?"

Before I could ask him what he meant by that, I felt a strange sensation on my lips. Something was touching them. At first I thought Natsuki had covered my mouth with his hand again, but this was too soft to be a hand. It was marshmallow-light, but faintly warm, and pleasant in general. And then, I heard a little smooching sound.

I froze, eyes wide. Lips grazed mine again, and my shoulders shot up in surprise.

This...is a kiss.

I was so panicked, that even after Natsuki's face pulled away from mine, I couldn't move for a while.

"Why...?" When I could finally force out a murmur, my voice was incredibly hoarse. "You...but I thought you were going out with Sugiura?"

"Come on, that's just a rumor. I'm not dating anyone—so

don't get the wrong idea." He whispered this last part right into my ear, and my heart did a somersault. There was something indefinably dirty about the way he said it. I opened my mouth to ask him again, but I was seized by a sudden fit of sneezes instead.

"Are you okay? I guess it's pretty dusty in here." Natsuki hurried to open the closet door. Light instantly flooded my vision. Squinting, my eyes against the brilliance, I eventually made out a beautiful wooden corridor. I'd seen that hallway a million times before, but dust made the air glitter as it floated around me, and it was like I'd stumbled into another world that looked just like my own, so my feet were as unsteady as if I were walking on a cloud.

After I'd followed Natsuki a few shaky steps down the hallway, he called out a "Be careful" to me without even turning around.

I stared at his back. My cheeks were burning, and my vision steadily began to swim.

"Hey. Why did you just..." My voice was barely audible.

Natsuki shrugged. "Well, there you have it."

There I have what?!

I wanted to find out, but I was afraid if I opened my mouth, my pounding heart might leap right out of it, so I couldn't speak. On top of that, my mind was still a total blank, and I couldn't string together a coherent sentence.

"Think about it, if you could," Natsuki said softly, and then turned to face me. I gaped. His face was so red it looked like it might burst into flames any second.

He said in a strained voice, "Okay, now I'd better go give the guys a talking-to," and he whirled around again.

The red flush never disappeared from his ears.

I don't really remember what happened after that. I have a vague memory of leaving the closet, stumbling unsteadily, and

saying, "I'm going home." But how I got home from Natsuki's house was a mystery. I'd left my bike there; at some point I'd blinked and realized I was standing at my own front door.

That...wasn't a dream, was it? I thought hazily to myself, lying in bed and staring up at the ceiling. I traced my bottom lip softly with my index finger. I tried to mimic the sensation I'd felt in that moment, but I couldn't get it to feel quite the same.

No, it was softer, and warmer. The kind of thing you find yourself realizing you want more of—

"No way! I did not just think that!" I hastily sat up, denying the thought out loud.

Calm down and think about this rationally. I took a deep breath, and ran over my memories of the day, trying my best not to writhe in shame as I did so.

First, Natsuki had kissed me. When I'd asked him what he meant by it, he'd said "There you have it." In other words, that kiss had not been an accident. Natsuki had done it deliberately. He'd also said, "Think about it, if you could." But he didn't tell me the most important things, so I had no clue what he'd been trying to tell me.

Okay, so I could guess. But I couldn't believe it.

Does Natsuki like me?

When I'd finally given this question voice in my mind, a rush washed over me from head to toe. I felt like I'd thought something I shouldn't have, and all kinds of emotions were jumbling up inside me, like shyness, and a feeling of too much, like I had to escape. I clawed at my head in confusion.

If Natsuki had just said it to me straight, I wouldn't have to go through this confusion, I thought, sulking—but for all I knew, I might have been just as confused if he'd confessed outright.

"There's no use thinking about it. I'm not going to figure it out." I was nothing but sighs and complaints.

Did he take me seriously when I jokingly said "Go out with me"? No, Natsuki knew I was just messing with him, so that couldn't be it. So then, what do I think of Natsuki? I wasn't grossed out by

that kiss. But then, I also feel like that was just because I was so in shock that I couldn't process any feelings about it.

I mean, first of all, Natsuki is a guy. I've never even considered loving or hating him in a romantic sense. I think of Natsuki as a friend, and... For some reason I felt a pang in my heart at that thought.

A friend? Is that all? Is that what I should call this feeling? Questions were popping up everywhere in my mind, and no matter how many times I answered them, they just sprang up again. Soon, my answers grew feebler and feebler, until finally, I wasn't confident in them anymore.

"What the hell is with this?" I clicked my tongue in irritation, and stood up.

Looking around restlessly, my eyes lit on a rental DVD on my desk that was due back soon. *I might as well get some fresh air and try to lighten my mood. Maybe it'll calm me down.* I slid the DVD into its case, told my parents downstairs that I was going to the video store, and left.

The cool, night air gradually seeped into my skin as I stood outside on the street. The sky was cloudless and full of stars, and I could see the ones that formed the Summer Triangle I'd learned about years ago in science class. We'd studied all kinds of other constellations, but that was the only one I still remembered.

Natsuki had loved watching the stars; he might be able to name more of them. When we were kids, he'd get so geared up for our stargazing sessions he was a totally different person from his usual quiet self. His eyes would sparkle, too.

"Look, Sho, that's Ursa Major!"

If I said I didn't know what he meant, he'd always explain it to me passionately—or perhaps "persistently" would be a more accurate word. Natsuki's talks on the stars would cover a broad range of topics, from space to mythology, and they bypassed "impressive" to cross straight over into "leave you bewildered" territory.

"Where? It doesn't look like a bear at all."

"Once you get the trick to it, you'll be able to connect the dots in the sky, too," Natsuki said, smiling as he peered through a telescope in the yard.

To be honest, I hadn't had much interest in the stars. My totally unromantic opinion was that lights in the sky and invisible lines between them weren't anything you could ever own, so I didn't care. The reason I always went stargazing with him anyway was to see him smile.

I loved seeing that smile Natsuki only showed me...Natsuki, who was my underling and no one else's. Sometimes, it was fun to tease him by blocking the path of the telescope, and making him shout or cry.

Thinking about it, if Natsuki was a shy kid, then I was a really wary kid who was a terror at home and quiet in front of others. I never tried to expand my circle of friends. That was probably why it made me so sad when Natsuki got more outgoing and made other friends; it felt like such a betrayal.

I sighed, and dragged my feet toward the video store.

Our local rental place was in the middle of the residential district, and it was about a ten-minute walk. I'd returned my DVD at the register and was just stopping by the new releases section when my cell phone started to buzz in the back pocket of my jeans. I took it out and saw a new text message from Natsuki. My heart instantly started pounding. After taking a deep breath, I peeked at the screen.

"Hey there. What are you doing right now?"

I'd worked up a lot of nerve to read that message, but it was nothing important. I was relieved, but disappointed, too. It was such a normal message, I wondered if what had happened had been some kind of dream or hallucination.

After wavering a little, I sent a curt reply, testing the waters.

"Why should you care? If you want something, say so."

"I don't want anything in particular. I just felt like talking to you."

"Don't waste airwaves texting me for something so stupid!"

"That's harsh. LOL. But yeah, that's the kind of Izumi-like thing I wanted to hear."

This last reply came as quick as if we were in a chat room, and before I could stop myself, I'd actually started to call him a moron out loud. I hurriedly covered up this slip with a fit of coughing.

"Are you sure you're not a masochist? What's so fun about being called stupid?"

"I'm not a masochist! It's the cute factor."

"Huh? Cute? What's cute?"

"Your reactions."

Face beet-red, I immediately typed *"Drop dead!"* in response.

Is this guy a pervert? A flirt? A con man? How can he say such embarrassing things so easily? Thanks to him, my heart's pounding and I can't slow down my breathing!

"Come on, 'drop dead' is a little harsh. I'm hurt!"

"It's your own fault! 'Cute,' my ass. I think your tastes are depraved."

"But it's true."

"Liar! I know you're just harassing me!"

"No, I'm not. I think you're cute, Izumi. No matter what you say or do, I continually regard you as cute."

This text message, with its random formal phrasing toward the end, (seriously, "continually regard"?), had enough destructive power to render me speechless.

This is too much, even for a joke. Why would he send me a message like this that makes me want to scream at the top of my lungs?

I was so rattled I couldn't even think of an insult. I couldn't type anything back.

"Izumi? Did you get my last text?"

Maybe he distrusted my lack of response, because his newest message sounded uneasy. I still couldn't think of anything to say. I just took deep breaths in and out. When I looked down at my hand holding the cell phone, I saw a barely perceptible tremble.

"FYI, I wasn't saying that to harass you, and I wasn't joking, either. And about what happened in the closet—"

The words on the screen cut off there, but the scroll bar showed that there was more to the message. I hesitated for awhile, long enough for the screen to go black, and then firmly pushed the arrow key. The backlight immediately flicked back on, and at the bottom of the white screen I saw new words.

"—I was serious about that, too."

I read the words over and over again. The heat in my face



reached all the way to my fingertips until I was feverish all over. It was like I'd drunk some sweet poison: my heart felt simultaneously thrilled and painfully constricted.

What the hell is this? My nervous system must be screwed up, I thought, gripping my phone tightly.

"If you were serious, then what the hell did you mean by it?"

I deleted *that* message as soon as I typed it, and sent a brief "Oh really?" instead. I was too scared to hear Natsuki tell it to me straight. Hell, I couldn't even figure out my *own* feelings—if I got any more of these shocking texts from Natsuki, I was sure my heart wouldn't be able to take it. Nervously, I waited for his answer, which came in the form of an announcement that our conversation was over:

"You're so cold. Okay, I'm going to go take a bath."

It was pretty brusque compared with the texts leading up to it, but I let out a sigh of relief. For some reason, there was a strange loneliness mixed in with the relief, like I'd swallowed a little bone along with a nice piece of fish.

"...are you listening? Hey, Izumi."

A voice calling me from behind interrupted my mulling. When I turned around, I saw Tagawa standing there holding a DVD. "Er, yo," I said awkwardly, startled.

"Don't see you around here often. Did you come to rent something too, Izumi?"

"No, I'm just here to return a movie..."

"I'm really into foreign soaps right now, so I'm in and out of this place all the time lately. I actually came to grab the next volume of the one I'm watching. Hey, Izumi, if you're done here, how about you walk home with me?" He grinned, displaying his crooked teeth.

I put my phone back in my pocket, watching him hesitantly. Tagawa and I had started talking pretty often recently, but we hadn't exactly gotten to the "walk home together" stage.

Maybe he'd noticed my confusion; now he was tilting his head to the side. "Or do you have other stuff to do?"

"No, not really..." I answered vaguely, and waffled for a bit. I hadn't been alone with Tagawa since elementary school, and I didn't know what to talk about. But then again, I wanted to have a real conversation with him, *because* it had been so long. So I tamped down my urge to shy away, and accepted his invitation.

The wind was blowing hard when we left the store. There was a mouth-watering smell wafting our way from somewhere—probably they were having dinner in one of the homes nearby. Memories of coming home from school with Natsuki and Tagawa in our elementary school days came flooding back to me.

"That'll be curry," I said.

"Curry udon, I think."

"No way, man, that is definitely curry with pork cutlet."

To cover up my awkwardness, I dove into some light banter. Tagawa got onboard right away. That helped me relax, and for a while we carried on an argument about whether Worcester sauce was okay in curry or not.

How long has it been since I had such a normal conversation?

"Okay, then, we'll say Worcester sauce is okay in curry. Now that we've peacefully resolved that issue, what I wanted to talk to you about was—"

The tone of Tagawa's voice got lower, and he stopped walking. His expression was uncharacteristically serious for someone normally so flighty. I reflexively steeled myself, and then suddenly he was bowing to me.

"I know it's self-indulgent of me to say this now, and maybe you'll tell me to piss off, but...well, uh. I'm really sorry."

"Huh?"

"I apologize for taking a bad attitude toward you since we started middle school. And I'm sorry that all I did when you'd fight with Matsuno was stand around and watch."

"Wh-whoa, where's this coming from?!" I asked anxiously. I had no clue what was going on.

"Well...Natsuki told me. That you'd been taking those notes for me, I mean."

"Why that little..."

"And so he said maybe I should talk to you more. I've wanted to give you a proper apology anyway, but I felt kind of uneasy about it, you know?" He paused. "But when Natsuki gave me that push, I finally made up my mind to do it."

After Tagawa got all that out, he heaved a deep sigh. His face said he'd finally gotten something off his chest that'd been there a long time, and he felt a lot better.

I gazed at his profile, confused.

"...In fifth grade you got into a huge fight with the rest of our class, remember? I was so sure you'd be able to make up with them somehow, but you started steadily making enemies out of everyone around you instead, you know?"

"It's not like I *set out* to make any enemies," I shot back, annoyed.

"I know that." Tagawa smiled. "See, the others didn't realize you and Natsuki had the kind of relationship where you could say whatever you wanted to each other. Even I thought they all went too far to take Natsuki's side. But you were fanning the flames, too—more like, you were picking fights, and you know it. So I kinda didn't feel like I could say anything, and even if I'd tried to smooth things over it would've just made everything worse, so there was nothing I could do." After a beat, he tacked on another apology. "Er, I guess that sounds like an excuse."

I gave my head a tiny shake. He was absolutely right.

"But lately, you've changed. So I can finally talk to you. I'm really sorry I've let you be alone all this time. The whole time I kept

thinking 'I gotta do something for him one of these days,' but I guess in the end I couldn't do a thing, huh?"

The sight of Tagawa bowing again panicked me. "No, that's not true. I was happy you talked with me today...thanks."

It made me uncomfortable to just come out and say what I really felt. I shyly averted my eyes from Tagawa, and kicked an empty can that was lying next to my feet. He laughed.

"I guess even you can drop the defensive act and open up sometimes, huh? Keep it up, okay?" he said.

"'Keep it up'? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm saying, stop riling up Matsuno. Sure, Matsuno's a little infatuated with Natsuki, but as long as you don't pick fights with him, I think he'll play nice."

He sounded like he was coaxing a child, and it pissed me off. I *wasn't* trying to rile up Matsuno. *He* was the one who picked fights with *me*. But now Tagawa sounded like he was making everything my fault, and I wasn't about to accept that.

Seeing me glower, he laughed. "Man, that takes me back. That peeved look of yours hasn't changed since we were kids."

Tagawa's dimply smile was an oddly nostalgic sight. In my mind I could see Tagawa the child superimposed over the Tagawa now, and I felt a layer of my stubborn pride slowly melting.

"I do get how you feel, though. You were always clingy with Natsuki, after all."

"I think you've got that the wrong way around."

"No, you were the one who was always fussing over him. You were like, 'He's *mine*!' you know? Every once in a while when I was with you, I felt like you were flaunting how close you two were." Tagawa delivered this unflattering speech with real feeling.

I scowled. Sure, we'd been close in elementary school, but I didn't think we'd been close enough for him to be *that* dramatic about it. But Tagawa wouldn't drop it. "You guys were totally lovey-dovey! Maybe it was because you always took that attitude that you offended everyone when Natsuki started getting cool all

of a sudden? No, wait! I'm sorry. I'm not trying to blame you." He hurriedly clapped a hand over his mouth.

I shook my head wryly. "Stop sounding like a broken record. You can quit apologizing." I paused for a long time, hesitating, and then added, "I mean, we're friends, right?"

I'd meant to say it matter-of-factly, but my voice betrayed me and I squeaked a little. But then Tagawa nodded bashfully. I smiled back, and bumped his outstretched fist with my own. It was a greeting we'd exchanged all the time as kids.

"That's the first time I've seen you smile in a long time. Man, your normal warped personality makes you seem even cuter when you smile."

"Hmph. My smile isn't cheap, you know," I deadpanned.

Tagawa groaned theatrically.

"What are you, an extortionist?"

And so we made our way through the darkened streets side by side, bantering back and forth. Being with Tagawa again brought home to me just how stupid my pride had been and how much time with friends I'd lost because of it, and it made me a little sad.

Most of the solitude I've endured has been my own fault.

At the thought, Natsuki's face sprang to mind. It wasn't just Tagawa; I'd been giving up time I could've spent with Natsuki, too. Now that that time was lost forever, I found myself regretting it keenly.

Why did I choose to give up something so priceless?

"Say, Izumi...have you hooked up with Natsuki lately or something?"

"Huh?" I whirled around to stare at him, startled at the abrupt mention of Natsuki's name.

"You were at his place today, right? Are you back to the way you were, then?"

I flushed, remembering the kiss and the text messages from earlier. "Um, not exactly..."

Tagawa seemed to interpret this as bashfulness. "I thought

so," he nodded, persuaded of his own conclusion. "Well, if you two are back together, then I'm happy for you. But I think when the other guys are around, you shouldn't get too close to Natsuki. After all, they've still got the wrong idea about you." He spoke vaguely, like it pained him to say the words, but even I knew he was right.

"Sorry for sounding so mean. But I'm not telling you to stay away from him forever, okay? I've talked with Natsuki about it, too, and we're working on a plan."

"No point in troubling yourself about me."

"Now that's a fine way to talk. Man, it's sickening how defensive you—ugh!"

I'd interrupted Tagawa's grumbling by slamming my fist into his stomach. I might've aimed better than I knew, because there were tears in his eyes. I gave him a contemptuous sniff and then hurriedly whispered "Thanks."

The truth was, I was happy for Tagawa's and Natsuki's concern. But like hell could I just come right out and say it. Talk about embarrassing.

"Jeez, you can't even show a little gratitude without acting all twisted? Getting a thank-you from such a prickly cactus *is* kinda thrilling, though." Tagawa gave a laugh, massaging his stomach.

When I told him his tastes were perverted, he retorted that he'd always been this way. Come to think of it, he was right. Apparently, I'd forgotten even that while we'd been apart.

"Man, you're heartless. It's just out of sight, out of mind with you, isn't it? Do you even remember my first name?"

"What do you take me for, an idiot? Of course I remember it." But then I fell quiet thinking of it, while Tagawa was giving me the silent treatment something fierce. "Masaki, okay?! It's Masaki!" I shouted frantically.

"You really did forget it for a second, didn't you?" he asked suspiciously. I guess the thought had really stung him.

What a moron. Like I'd forget that! No, seriously, I wouldn't.

"III-ZUU-MIII..."

"Okay, come on, let's go home! You want to watch your soap, right?" I shook off the reproach in his tone and started walking with long strides. Tagawa followed obediently, still grumbling. It'd been my fault in the first place, but his voice was so pitiful I couldn't help but laugh.

This put Tagawa in a bad mood, and so I was in danger of a fight breaking out right after we'd just become friends again. It was a little ridiculous.

The next day at lunch, I went up to the roof with Natsuki. The sky was a patchwork of white and azure, and the clouds were twisty as they streamed by. It looked like the wind up there was real strong; the weather report this morning hadn't been lying when it said a typhoon was approaching.

I leaned against the fence and drank a carton of milk, glancing at Natsuki from time to time. Natsuki turned his face my way every so often, too. We were eyeing each other like we both had things we wanted to say. But we'd been exchanging nothing but small talk for a while.

"Huh, so then you and Tagawa made up."

"Don't call it 'making up.' You make it sound like we're kids."

"You think so? But it's a good thing!" Natsuki smiled, as pleased as if he'd been the one to get a friend back. It was the same smile as always, but somehow I couldn't meet his gaze, and I averted my eyes. I was feeling shy and uncomfortable around him, and I couldn't settle down.

"I'm jealous of Tagawa, though. I want to be able to talk to you wherever I feel like it, too!" He ducked his head and sighed.

"You make such a big deal out of everything. We see each other like this now and then; isn't that enough?"

"No, it just makes me miss you. We're practically Romeo and Juliet here. Don't you think, oh Romeo?"

"Why don't you drink some *real* poison, and drop dead?"

"Meanie. Did you want to be Juliet instead?" He delivered this crack with a deadpan face, and I glared at him, eyes flashing. I hated that he had the nerve to make that kind of joke.

I silently cursed him for being so damn glib. I'd been nervous as hell when he called me up here, wondering what he wanted to talk about. My face had gone rigid with fear, thinking he'd tell me point-blank that he liked me. But then, when I'd actually gone to the roof, Natsuki had only asked me to eat with him, and we'd started a friendly meal.

I'd thought maybe he'd say something after we finished eating, but he was showing no signs of doing so. He was just staring at me once in a while and then smiling as if to cover up the slip.

I felt deflated, and also *really* embarrassed at how overly self-conscious I'd been. However, those emotions were followed by relief. I wouldn't know what to do if Natsuki confessed to me. I didn't hate him, but he was a *guy*. I'd never considered homosexual love, and I didn't really understand it, either.

"Say, Natsuki," I murmured.

"What?" he asked, turning to face me. He must've sensed something in my voice, because his face had stiffened a little. When I noticed this, my heart skipped a beat. Something in my chest was constricting, and I couldn't think what to say next. Maybe Natsuki couldn't think of anything either—that stiff smile was still stuck on his face, and he was looking everywhere but at me.

"Say," I finally said with feigned casualness. "Are you free on Sunday?"

"You mean this Sunday?"

"Yeah. I mentioned you to my mom, and she said; 'Oh, it's been so long, I want to see him.' So, if you don't have anything else planned, you wanna come over?"

Natsuki's eyes went wide.

He probably never dreamed I'd ask him over. But I was just as surprised as he was. Even I didn't know what'd prompted me to do it—my mouth had just run away with itself.

"If you can't, don't worry about it," I said hastily.

Hurry, gotta talk my way out of this.

"It's just my mom, after all. I mean, I wanted to thank you, too, but I don't have to call you over to my place to do that."

Natsuki tilted his head. "Thank me?"

"For Tagawa. You told him all that stuff. And now we're friends again."

"I didn't do anything," he answered flatly, shaking his head. "Tagawa was worried about you to begin with."

"But you gave us a catalyst. If it weren't for my stupid pride, I could've talked to him earlier, too, but..."

"Izumi..."

"I'm going to try to be constructive and do my best from now on. If I get to where I can talk to the other guys...I-I can talk to you whenever I want, right? Not that I mean that in a weird way or anything." I really *meant* the part about wanting to talk to him whenever I felt like it, but it came out sounding angry. The truth was, I was still at a loss. I was scared to hear the follow-up to his last text message, and even if I did hear it, I'd have no idea how I wanted to answer him.

But I wanted to talk to Natsuki more. I wanted to hang out together and have fun like we used to. I didn't know if this feeling was just friendship or if it would drift in a different direction, but the thing was, I wanted to find out. Everything going on inside me was so uncertain, but there was a clutching feeling in my heart, and I wanted to know what it meant. That was the only thing I was clear on.

While I was thinking these thoughts, Natsuki was still gaping at me wide-eyed. Then all of a sudden, he gave me a fierce hug.

"Wh-what are you doing, you moron?!"

When he eventually answered, his voice was fervent and

hoarse. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "But I'm just so happy."

Embarrassed at being hugged, I struggled and demanded to be let go. Just then, like a gift from some benevolent god, the bell rang to herald the end of lunch. Natsuki returned to his senses and reluctantly let me go, standing up straight. He looked pretty put out, but I had bigger problems. My heart was beating so fast it might be causing me physical damage.

"Oh, right, Izumi."

Natsuki had started to make for the stairs when he abruptly spun around again. I reflexively steeled myself. "Wh-what?"

"About Sunday—when should I come over? Is one o'clock okay?"

"Huh? Uh, sure...but you might as well come before lunch. Mom will probably want to feed you anyway."

"Is that okay? Sure, I'd love to." Natsuki beamed. Then he gestured to the stairs. "Shall we go?"

I nodded and followed after him.

School was out, cleaning duty was over, and I was in my classroom packing up to go home. Pretty much everyone had already gone on to their clubs or left for home. I'd seen Natsuki a little while ago, but now he was nowhere around either.

The sight of the deserted hallways would have soothed the "old" me. However, today the emptiness made me feel lonely. I sighed a little, staring at my hands.

"Hey, are you on your way home?"

A voice behind me abruptly jolted me out of my trance and I turned to see Tagawa standing there, carrying a light bag in one hand.

"Oh, it's just you," I said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean? You're such a grouch."

Anyway, why the gloomy sighs? If you're having any problems, you just tell big bro Tagawa here."

"Big bro'? Yeah, right. Idiot." I hesitated a little, and then invited him to walk home with me. Tagawa nodded right away, and we ambled out of the classroom. The western sun was bathing the hallways in a gentle orange glow. When I looked out through the window over the courtyard, the sunbeams were so bright, they almost burned my eyes.

The sun looked like this yesterday evening, too, I thought idly, chatting with Tagawa.

As promised, Natsuki had come over on Sunday at ten to noon, and we'd eaten lunch together. Then we'd gone up to my room and done some studying, now and then exchanging jokes or having fun talking about the old days. We'd had a good time, but then exchanged some more silent, awkward glances before parting ways.

"Huh, so you were hanging out with Natsuki again?"

When I casually mentioned Sunday to Tagawa, he acted as happy as if it'd been him having the fun.

"Yeah, but we were just studying."

"Hey, sounds fine to me. Good for you! Boy, seeing you two go back to your old friendship is a relief for me, too!"

"I guess so..." I nodded vaguely.

It was true. Yesterday it seemed like Natsuki and I had gone back to our elementary school days. It was fun being with him, and things were never dull. I wanted to talk to him more, and text him more, too. If I ranked everyone I knew in order of priority, I'd say he was the one most special to me. But was that the same as *liking* him?

I had no romantic experience, so I wasn't confident that I could say for sure.

It's been so long since I had any friends, maybe I'm feeling overly possessive of Natsuki? Maybe I'm misinterpreting my feelings of friendship?

A painful lump formed in my throat as I thought this.

"Yo, why the long face?" Tagawa broke into my reverie, looking worried.

I mumbled something evasive. Then a question suddenly occurred to me. "Hey, are you interested in anyone right now?" I blurted.

"Huh? Naw, not really. I mean, I've got the ass fetish, remember? So I'm waiting for my ideal ass to come along." He made this ridiculous assertion with perfect seriousness.

Tagawa's superficial philosophy of love disgusted me—but at the same time, I envied his simplicity. I gave a small sigh. Just then, I noticed two shadows on the floor a little ways ahead. They were stretching out from the window to our left, and when some impulse made me look in that direction, I saw Natsuki standing outside in his sports jersey. Facing him was Sugiura.

"Natsuki?"

I thought he went to practice.

I opened my mouth to call out to him, but Tagawa abruptly clapped a hand over my mouth from behind and dragged me down into a squatting position.

"What the hell was that for?!" I managed to protest. With his other hand, he held a finger to his own mouth and shushed me, never letting me go.

"Keep it down, moron. Isn't it obvious they're having a private moment?"

"What do you mean, private?"

"Come on, you know everybody says they're going out. Natsuki never confirms or denies it, but from the look of them now, I'd say it's true." On the surface, it sounded like he was being considerate of Natsuki, but there was a suspicious smile on his face.

I wavered as we crouched there.

Eavesdropping was not good. But if I stood up now, Natsuki and Sugiura might notice me. They were on the other side of the window, after all. If they saw me like that, it would be like coming

right out and saying "I was eavesdropping!"

And though I knew it was wrong, I was really curious about their conversation.

"You're so mean, Natsuki. Why didn't you come yesterday? It was my birthday!" Sugiura's voice was a little coy, and a lot displeased.

My heart thumped. Natsuki had glanced at his phone every so often yesterday, and he'd sent some text messages, too. I hadn't paid any particular attention at the time, but maybe he'd been talking to Sugiura?

"Look, I told you, I already had plans, and I couldn't make it. Be reasonable."

"But you said you might be able to put in just a tiny appearance! My friends were looking forward to you coming, you know."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I texted you, didn't I?" Natsuki apologized tiredly.

I was pretty sure he was at his wits' end. Tagawa grinned and said, "Looks like a lover's quarrel, eh?"

"But Natsuki...your plans were with Izumi, right?"

"How did you know?"

I was as surprised as Natsuki was at that one.

"Mari was telling me that she saw the two of you walking around together. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Well, yeah...more or less."

"Say, Natsuki, I know you're a busybody, but don't you think it's time to quit? If you pay too much attention to him, he'll just get in another fight with Matsuno."

"I can't just stop hanging out with him. Izumi hasn't done anything wrong. It wouldn't be fair."

"Izumi's not a kid anymore. He can take care of himself. Plus, it seems like he and Tagawa have gotten friendly lately, too." She gave a clap of her hands, as if to say *Problem solved!*

But Natsuki was hanging his head, not saying anything. Sugiura sighed under her breath, and then patted his head.

"You're such a softy," she said ruefully.

He protested, "Hey, cut that out," but showed no signs of pushing her hand away. They looked more like a couple in love than a pair of good friends.

"Say, Natsuki," she pressed. "Are you free the Sunday after exams? If you've got some time, come out shopping with me to make up for yesterday."

"Uh...uh-huh..." he answered noncommittally.

In that moment, I think my breath stopped. The ice that covered my heart was jagged with spikes, and they tore through me. More than pain, I felt a freezing cold spread all over my body. I shivered.

Eventually their shadows in the hallway slipped to the left, and disappeared. They'd probably each headed to their clubs. I realized my fists were clenched, and I slowly released them. Sweat poured out of my skin, and I was quivering.

"I wonder if that was what you'd call a lover's quarrel? But anyway, they go well together. Good-looking boy, good-looking girl." Tagawa finally let me go and stood up, stretching. I copied him, but my steps were so weak and unsteady it was questionable whether I was moving my body of my own will.

"Well, I have to say I wouldn't mind a girl as cute as Sugiura," Tagawa said as we put on our shoes by the front door. "Sure makes a guy jealous of Natsuki, doesn't it?"

"Maybe so," I said, hiding the unease that was tormenting me. But my voice came out exhausted. Natsuki's assurance that he wasn't dating Sugiura popped back into my mind, but after seeing them like that, I just couldn't believe him.

"What's wrong, Izumi? You've got a seriously scary look on your face." Tagawa was frowning worriedly. Apparently, he'd noticed something was wrong right away.

"It's nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing. You don't have a thing for Sugiura, do you?"

"O-Of course not!" I shouted, rattled.

Now *that* had come out of nowhere.

However, I regretted it immediately. Tagawa was gaping at me, eyes bugged out. I couldn't bear him looking at me like that, and I apologized right away. "Sorry."

"Nah, I'm sorry for saying something like that. Er...well, cheer up, okay?" He forced a smile and thumped me on the shoulder.

I think he may have gotten the wrong idea. But correcting him would be a pain in the ass, so I didn't try to explain myself any more.

After that, we walked home together, but I didn't respond much to Tagawa's attempts at conversation, and the atmosphere between us was strained. When we parted ways, he gave my hair a thorough ruffling and told me, "Don't let it get you down, okay?" Then he flashed me a little smile and left. I just stood there watching him melt away into the evening.

A week later, our three-day exam period began. There'd never been a chance in hell I was going to do well, considering I was still out of sorts, so I greeted the weekend in a dark frame of mind. Everyone else was probably singing songs of freedom, psyched to be released from the need to study. But me, I just stayed depressed.

"You're sure down in the dumps," my mother said as we ate yakisoba in the living room at lunchtime, "Did all that test cramming wear you out?"

She really does look just like me, huh?

I told her nothing was wrong, and went back to my room after I'd cleared the table. Lying on my bed and looking out the window, I could see the sky was crystal-clear. Gorgeous weather. The cherry trees in the yard were swaying, so there was probably a nice breeze, too. But I couldn't work up the desire to go outside.

I sighed, and then picked up the cell phone by my pillow. The

time on the screen was 1:20. Sunday. It was the perfect time to go out and have fun somewhere. I lay back down on the bed and picked up a paperback book, moving my eyes over the print, but I couldn't follow the story at all. I tried listening to music, then cleaning my room, but the only thing I could focus on was the damn cell phone. After a while I couldn't take it anymore, and with a feeling of disgust I picked it up.

"Whatcha doing?"

I read this concise message over and over before finally hitting "send" with a hesitant finger. The time I waited tensely for Natsuki's response felt like an hour. But in reality, less than ten minutes had gone by before I heard the "new message" tone.

"Wow, it's not every day you text me first. What's up?"

Natsuki's message sounded the same as always. I let out a little sigh. Feelings of relief and caution were swirling around inside my head, leaving me on edge.

"It's nothing. Felt like asking."

"LOL, what's with the clipped sentences? I'm at home."

This answer reassured me for a moment but then I started to doubt him. *What about his promise to go shopping with Sugiura?* But obviously I couldn't come right out and ask that. I wavered for a while, and then put out a casual feeler:

"You watching TV or something?"

"I'm not really doing anything much."

This was an unusually vague answer from him. I frowned, uncertain somehow. It felt like he had a guilty conscience, like he was keeping something from me.

What are you, a moron? I immediately chided myself.

Natsuki had said he wasn't dating Sugiura, and he'd just been having a normal conversation with her before. That was all. So why was I so hung up on those two? I was feeling panicked for no reason.

I messed around with the settings on the phone for a while, irritated. Then I couldn't take it anymore, and started moving my thumbs over the keys.

"Okay, then would you mind if I came over? There's a math problem I can't figure out."

I'm such a creep. Even I was disgusted with myself for sending that message. Why couldn't I just drop it? Now I'd even come up with a realistic excuse. I honestly felt pathetic. When had I become such a despicable person? As if to mock my sorry self, Natsuki's response didn't come for a long while.

I was abruptly seized by panic, and my heart lurched painfully. What if Natsuki had seen right through me, and knew what I was really feeling? While I was agonizing over this paranoid delusion, the screen of my cell phone lit up.

"Sorry, I have some relatives visiting. I promise to help you with it another day; is that okay?"

My fingers froze in indecision. Natsuki hadn't said a thing about relatives visiting when he'd talked with Sugiura.

Could he be lying to me? No, maybe it was a sudden visit. Natsuki's an honest guy. He wouldn't lie if he was planning to go out with Sugiura today.

I believed that. I'd wanted to find out for sure, but I didn't

want to grill him anymore and annoy him, so I couldn't send another text.

Natsuki didn't send any more messages either, and I spent the whole day in a funk. Thanks to which, I ended up going to school the next day short on sleep.

As I sat slumped over my desk, Tagawa bounded up to me. "Mornin', Izumi!" He was way too cheerful that morning. So cheerful it pissed me off. "Whoa, hey, are you okay? You look like hell, man."

"Shut up."

"But you *do*! If you're really feeling that bad, you should go to the nurse's office." Tagawa's words weren't exactly nice, but he did look worried.

Was he always such a busybody?

I was suspicious for a moment, but then I remembered something that made me take him at face value.

He probably still thinks I'm in love with Sugiura. So he must figure I got these dark circles under my eyes from nursing a broken heart.

"Ah, I see you still suck at reading a guy's mood," I said

"Ha ha ha. What was that for, eh? You pickin' a fight with me first thing in the morning?" As he favored me with a scary smile, the classroom door opened and Natsuki walked in.

"Hi guys. Looks like you're having a lot of fun for so early in the morning."

"Yo, good timing. We're living it up over here, talking about how Izumi's face looks like death warmed over." Tagawa jerked his jaw in my direction with a grin.

"Whoa, those are definitely some major bags under your eyes. What's the deal?"

"It's nothing. I just stayed up late watching TV."

"Okay, but if you don't feel well later, you should go to the nurse's office."

"Hey, what are you guys, my guardians?" I shrugged, eyelids

drooping. They were sure making a big deal out of a few rings under my eyes.

Natsuki still looked worried, but two guys in front of the blackboard called his name, and after repeating "Don't push yourself too hard," he went over to join them.

I propped my chin on one hand and watched Natsuki as he smiled happily. Lately, I'd been exchanging greetings with him even in front of other people. But we never said more than that. If we talked for too long, Matsuno and the others would interrupt us with catcalls, and it was just annoying. I knew it couldn't be helped, but it was lonely to watch from a distance as Natsuki talked with the other guys. Why was it okay with them, but not with me? Sure, I'd brought this on myself—but I felt hemmed in by these invisible walls around me.

I sighed, irritated. Then out of nowhere, Tagawa was patting my head.

"What was that for?"

"Nothing special. You just looked so much like an abandoned little kid, I couldn't help myself," he cracked, and ruffled my hair. I was grateful for his concern, but his stubborn patting was bugging me, so I slapped him away good and hard.

Then class started as usual, followed by lunch break.

I wasn't very hungry, probably for lack of sleep. So I ate one roll of bread and then headed to the library to find a place to nap, since it was way too noisy to sleep in the classroom. As I approached the courtyard where I'd seen Natsuki and Sugiura the other day, I could see a few students sitting under the trees eating out of their lunchboxes.

Our school didn't have a cafeteria, so everyone ate wherever they felt like. I mostly ate with Tagawa lately, but up until that point, I'd always been alone. Natsuki, on the other hand, was always being dragged to different places by different people.

"One of the popular people, huh?" I muttered. My stomach turned.

Huh. I feel a little queasy. Maybe the lack of sleep really did make me sick? I decided to head for the nurse's office instead of the library.

The nurse's office was next to the guest entrance on the first floor, and the area around it was always quiet. I made my way through a series of deserted hallways until I saw two people at the bottom of the staircase right next to my destination.

It was Natsuki and Sugiura.

Natsuki had his back to me, so I couldn't see his face. Staring at the back of his head, I had a really bad feeling about this.

I'd just decided to start walking again as if I hadn't seen them when Sugiura cooed, "Thanks for yesterday. It was really fun."

"You're welcome. You tired me out a little, though. The passion girls put into shopping is really something."

She gave a theatrically evil laugh. "I guess that'll show you! Come with me again next time, okay? It's a lot easier when I have someone to carry my bags."

"Look, you..."

"Now, now, don't be angry. Here, I'll give you a reward." Smiling brightly, she abruptly wrapped her arms around him.

"H-hey! Let go!" Natsuki cried, flustered.

Now Sugiura was patting his head, saying "Aw, how cute! Now don't be shy!" Her eyes were glistening seductively, and her gorgeous, flawless cheeks were tinted red.

I stood rooted to the spot, gazing at Natsuki's back. His hands were still resting on her shoulders in an attitude of discomfort, but he didn't try to push her off.

Then Sugiura noticed me, and jumped away from him.

"Oh, is that Izumi?"

"Izumi?" Natsuki echoed, turning around in surprise. When he saw me, he sprinted towards me. "What's wrong? Are you sick after all?"

"I guess." I didn't feel like talking to him. Instead, I stumbled in the direction of the infirmary.

But Sugiura persisted and asked me, "Are you okay?"

I answered with an equally short "Yeah."

It would've been a pain to have to talk to her any more than that, but thankfully, she seemed to have to be somewhere. She told me to take care, and rushed off.

I stumbled into the nurse's office. The nurse wasn't there though, and I was all alone in the medicinal-smelling room. White curtains fluttered at the half-open window. The cool breeze felt wonderful.

Wow, I guess I really wasn't feeling well.

"Izumi, are you okay?"

Natsuki had followed me in. When I sat down on the infirmary bed, he came up to stand in front of me. I wordlessly lay down and wrapped myself from head to toe in the quilt. I thought that sent a clear message that I wanted him to go away, but he stayed, sitting down on the bed beside me. "So...did you see that just now?" he asked, voice hesitant.

I clutched the sheets tightly. *Fake ignorance.* "See what?"

"Well...uh..."

"Were you doing something that would get you in trouble?" I shot.

"It was nothing," Natsuki said quickly.

That was the end of our conversation. Quiet descended on the room once again, and the nurse still hadn't come back. If I wasn't going to get any help, I at least wanted to be left alone, but instead Natsuki was stroking my back conscientiously through the quilt.

I gave a small sigh. Maybe I was starting to get seriously sick, because I felt awful. I couldn't get the sight of Natsuki and Sugiura out of my mind, either. Natsuki had said he wasn't dating her. But just now they'd been holding each other and playing like kittens, and they'd looked like a couple in love.

What the heck is the deal? Did Natsuki lie to me?

But which thing was the lie? That kiss and those text messages — what had *they* been all about? The more I thought about



it, the less I understood. My head hurt, and I wanted to throw up.

Natsuki was worrying over me, and how I'd fallen silent. "Izumi, is there anything you want?" The instant I heard his rattled voice, I was suddenly filled with revulsion.

You were just fooling around with Sugiura two seconds ago, and now you're going to fuss over me? Give me a break!

Anger blazed inside me until my heart felt like it'd been burned raw.

I let out a deep breath and stole a glance at Natsuki. He was frowning with worry.

Do I like this guy? Is that why my heart hurts so much? Maybe so, I thought nervously, and my entire body started to shake.

I was afraid. A strange, unfamiliar terror started to eat away at me. The feeling of "love"—the unease that it was directed toward another guy—the smile on Sugiura's face when she drew up close to him—the way it had felt so unnatural when I drew up close to him—all kinds of images and feelings were churning around in my brain, and the resulting dissonance reverberated in my skull like a cacophony of radio noise.

"Natsuki," I said, after a while.

"What?"

In a low voice, I asked, "What were you doing yesterday?"

Natsuki went quiet for a moment, and then he said in a perfectly calm tone, "Relatives were visiting, so I was entertaining them. Why?"

"I see," I muttered. There was nothing else to say.

Natsuki was lying to me—yes, honest, forthright Natsuki. I didn't know why, but he was hiding his relationship with Sugiura from me. That was all I needed to know. If I learned any more, it'd only hurt me.

Slowly, I sat up, matching my movements to the sadness that was surging up inside me. "Natsuki. You don't need to bother with me anymore." My voice was hoarse.

"Why not?" His eyes went wide. "Where did that come from?"

Did I do something to make you angry?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"About that kiss..."

Natsuki had grabbed my shoulders, but now his hands froze. His face had gone rigid, and he was staring hard at my mouth, as if desperate to make sure he heard every word I said. I went on, avoiding his eyes. "I'm already interested in someone."

The words echoed coldly through the room. Natsuki had turned to stone, eyes still wide. Eventually, he sucked in a huge breath, hanging his head low and biting his lip. Then, shoulders hunched over like they carried a heavy burden, he quietly got up and left.

The only thing that remained was silence.

I was left alone without any excuses for Sugiura, or any explanations for the kiss.

What the hell was that, in the end? Just something he did to make peace with me? I thought, trying to fill up the gaping hole in my chest with questions.

But now that the hole had opened up, it wasn't so easy to fill. I forgot to even try to wipe away the tears; I merely stared up at the ceiling, and realized that the love I'd only just now woken up to was already over.

Starting the next day, I avoided Natsuki completely. Everyone around us suspected something was up, since we'd been getting along pretty well lately. Tagawa in particular wouldn't stop asking me about it. I dodged every single one of his questions, until he finally snapped and dragged me out behind the building after school.

"Hey, did something happen between you and Natsuki?" he asked.

"Weren't you the one who told me not to act friendly with him

in public? I'm just doing what you said."

"I didn't tell you to *fight* with him. And you were getting to where you could talk to each other in homeroom. Why are you keeping your distance now?"

"Give it a rest," I spat dangerously. That lecturing tone didn't sit well with me. "It's got nothing to do with you."

Tagawa's mood immediately soured. "You're right, I guess it doesn't. And I don't know what the circumstances are, either. But that's still no way to talk to me. This attitude of yours is why you always clash with people. If you don't do something about that personality, you'll be a nuisance to even Natsuki, and after he's gone to a lot of trouble for you." He meant for his voice to sting, and it did.

I didn't need Tagawa to tell me what a jerk I was. I knew that better than anyone. But hearing it from him, a guy I'd known since elementary school, made it worse.

Am I really that much of a pain in the ass?

"I-Izumi?" When tears started to spill out of my eyes, Tagawa totally lost it.

Jeez, at times like this, you're supposed to pretend not to notice anything!

I wanted to tell him, but my voice was so racked with sobs I could hardly get a word out.

"You don't...have to tell...I'm just a stupid..."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I crossed the line." Then, mumbling something about not knowing what to do with me, Tagawa put his arms around me in a hug. Having him treat me so kindly made me cry even harder, and I turned the front of Tagawa's shirt into a sopping mess. I didn't even care about appearances or my pride anymore.

If this is how awful it feels, I should never have let Natsuki go.

I'd run away from him because of my fears, but it hurt so badly even after he was gone. The agony showed me exactly how much I'd liked him, and the regrets piled up.

It was so unbearable. I only wanted to get away from the pain somehow.

Tagawa stroked my back the whole time. It was the kind of comforting that made me wonder if he was mocking me, but judging from the uncomfortable look on his face, I think he was just at a loss for what to do. I felt a bit guilty, but just this once I took full advantage of his kindness. I had the feeling if I didn't, I'd just crumple to the ground and not be able to get up again.

"You really haven't changed since we were kids." Tagawa was smiling wryly above my head.

I privately agreed. We stood there until sunset, me crying into Tagawa's chest.

The exams ended, rainy season passed, and in the blink of an eye, it was summer break. I'd hardly exchanged any words with Natsuki since that incident in the nurse's office. We'd stopped texting each other, too, and settled into a "classmates who don't have much to do with each other" relationship.

Natsuki had been busy with his club since before summer break started, and I knew he'd been doing hard training every day after school. Maybe that was why in class he'd looked pale, and kind of haggard lately. Everyone around him seemed worried, but Natsuki just smiled and said he was fine, never taking a break.

When Tagawa would come to my desk every so often, he'd look at Natsuki's desk in front of me with a concerned look. "I wonder if he's really okay. This morning he looks like a ghost!"

"If he says he's fine, he's probably fine."

"Well, I guess..." Tagawa heaved a sigh, conceding that the summer heat had him feeling worn out lately, too.

After I'd finished sobbing my guts out that day, Tagawa had taken me home. It was humiliating that he'd seen me cry, but I was

grateful for his comfort. The only thing was, the wound in my heart wasn't easily healed, and I still felt its pangs. I was still depressed when summer break started.

On the first day, I went out and bought a watch. Normally, I hated wearing anything on my wrists, so I would always check the time on my cell phone instead. But now every time I looked at it, I couldn't help but wonder if I had a new text message. Though the new-message tone hadn't even rung, I still couldn't quite give up hope. I hated how pitiful that was, so I'd stopped looking at the phone any more than necessary.

I'd never had many friends in the first place, so it wouldn't be that big of a deal if I just got rid of the phone. I ignored it and devoted my overabundance of free time to homework and DVDs.

But if I stayed home all the time my mom worried about me, so I ended up going out to kill time every so often. As a poor high school student, I naturally had no money, so I always went to the library. Getting a part-time job would be the most profitable way to kill time, but our school had a rule against jobs, and if they found me out I'd be suspended, no questions asked. Some students did it anyway, but I didn't have the guts for that. Even if the chances a teacher would see me were low, it was too dangerous for someone who had as many enemies in class as I did.

And so the first week of my solitary summer vacation passed. I was enjoying an episode of *Buddhist Prayer Rangers: Monkman* in the living room when I heard Mom call my name.

"Ta-da! What do you think of your mother's greatest masterpiece, Sho?"

"Huh?" I looked down at the object that had suddenly been thrust into my arms. It was a checkered-pattern yukata made of dark blue cloth. *Aha*, I thought, the light bulb turning on in my head. Japanese dressmaking was a hobby of Mom's, and every summer she made new yukatas for all three of us—herself, Dad, and me. Calling them her "greatest masterpieces" every single time was just something she did to be cute, but she really was good, and this was

well-done as usual.

"It's a nice shade of blue," I agreed. "And the pattern's restrained, but not too boring. Very smart."

"Isn't it just? I found some great fabric this year, so I really gave it my all. Let's all three of us go see the fireworks together on the weekend!"

I was a little dismayed at how carried away with excitement she was, but I nodded like a good boy. "All right, all right." To be honest, it was pretty damn embarrassing to still be going to the fireworks with my parents all dressed up in yukatas at my age, but it was part of being a dutiful son. Mom put so much passion into fireworks and yukata-making, if I said I didn't want to go, I might not get lunch for the rest of the summer.

"Fireworks, eh?"

I looked at the calendar on the living room wall. The square for the coming Saturday was ringed with flowers, and "Fireworks!" was written there in my mother's handwriting. With forceful strokes, too.

Come to think of it, Natsuki had come along sometimes when we were kids. How long ago was the last time? Back then, he'd been forced into his sister's hand-me-down yukata, and he was on the point of tears. When I'd told him he looked cute, he'd fidgeted in embarrassment, and the yukata's narrow sash had fluttered in a way that really *was* cute. Then he'd grabbed my sleeve and toddled along unsteadily after me in his clogs.

Have I liked Natsuki since way back then?

When I thought about it, all I came up with was corroborating evidence, which made me feel gloomy.

Two nights later, my father, my mother, and I all headed for the riverside fireworks display. This year, all of our yukatas were the

same color, with just the patterns and little touches differing for each one. When I grumbled that it was embarrassing to wear matching clothes like some crazy couple, I got in trouble with Mom.

"What's wrong with looking like a nice, close family?!" she'd said.

My father, by the way, was grinning broadly. He had no complaints.

Are they going to be sappy newlyweds forever? It was revolting. *Leave your recently heartbroken son out of it.*

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to go take a look around." I waved, and then split before they could start in on their lovey-dovey act and mortify me.

The fireworks display had already started, and there was a huge crowd. Stalls upon stalls lined both sides of the roped-off street, but there was a tight wall of people in the way, and I was never going to make it there. I gave up and let the crowd carry me along, just going wherever there was the most room to move.

When I'd walked far enough for the clamor around me to die down, I found myself in front of a small park with only two or three pieces of playground equipment. People in yukatas were sitting on the benches inside. I bought a fizzy drink from a vending machine and then leaned on the guardrail by the entrance. The cold bubbles popped deliciously in my parched throat. Halfway through the can, they started sticking more inside my mouth, and I stifled a belch.

"Phew..." I sighed, and looked up at the sky. I couldn't see the fireworks, but the booming sounds of the explosions vibrated through my body. Come to think of it, I'd come all this way, and I hadn't seen a single firework! But I couldn't work up the energy to brave that throng of people again. Effervescent carbonation probably suited me better right now than sparkling in the skies anyway.

Ha ha.

"That was a little lame," I said aloud to myself, and then blushed at the slip. I looked around to cover it up, and saw four or five guys making a ruckus as they walked down the street towards

the park. They seemed familiar, and sure enough, when I got a better view they turned out to be classmates. I went wide-eyed and almost dropped my drink. In the middle of the group, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, was Natsuki. And as luck would have it, he chose that moment to casually turn around, and our eyes locked.

"Izumi...?"

He could've just kept going, but no, he slipped away from the group and jogged up to me. I sipped my drink, trying to hide my jitters. My pulse sped up and pounded in unison with the bubbles popping in my throat.

"So you came too, huh Izumi?" He paused. "Did your mom make that?"

"You've got a good memory." The feigned calm of my voice didn't even fool me.

"It looks good on you," Natsuki said, but even that compliment was like a stab in my heart. Natsuki's smile was a little dull, though, and his eyes wouldn't meet mine even though he started the conversation.

Something clenched in my chest, and I itched to leave. I was praying he would just hurry up and keep walking, when—

"Well, you're sure enthusiastic." Matsuno came up with the others to stand by Natsuki's side, and gave me a sneer. "So even you come to festivals, huh? You're always saying how you hate crowds and noise, so I thought for sure you'd be home."

Another guy next to him nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you seemed more the type to be watching TV all alone or something."

The sarcasm in their tones ticked me off, but I clenched my muscles against the irritation, and favored them with a devilish smile. They'd been steeling themselves for a fight, and seemed surprised at this unforeseen reaction.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but my whole family comes to the fireworks display every year. If you're looking for something to eat, I recommend the takoyaki stand down that way, next to the mailbox. It's good, and the portions are big."

When I added that they were crispy on the outside yet nice and gooey on the inside, chubby Kimura's eyes gleamed. Maybe they were all starving, because they started whispering things like "Hey, takoyaki sounds good."

At that point, Natsuki, who had been listening in silence, smacked his fist into his palm. "The octopus guy, right! Now that brings back memories. Yeah, back in the day we couldn't finish a whole helping, so we always split one."

"But *you* always scooped out the octopus and just ate the dough!"

"Oh, you remember that?"

"How could I forget? I'm the one that had to eat all that leftover octopus. Plus, you were always crying and saying 'But the octopus is scary 'cause it's so slimy!'" I did that last part in a childish falsetto, and the group erupted into laughter.

Natsuki gave a crooked smile, scratching his head. A guy with glasses behind him teased, "For real?" He shrugged lightly.

"What, have you and Izumi always been like this?"

"Yeah. Izumi was a sadist and I was a masochist, so we were perfect for each other."

"Ah, right, a queen and her manservant, huh? I never knew."

When that bit of Natsuki's conversation with Four-Eyes wafted over to me, I yelled at him, flustered. "What are you, a moron?!"

At which point Four-Eyes and the rest of the gang all laughed and went, "It's true!" A friendly atmosphere settled over the gathering, and I reluctantly smiled, too. At that, the others relaxed, and people began to smile back.

It felt as wonderful as a cool breeze on a summer night, and my heart lightened somehow. This might be the first time since we'd started high school that we'd all laughed together like this. However, Natsuki's smile alone was forced. He let it slip away with a small sigh.

"Hey, Natsuki, let's get going," Matsuno said, face sullen as ever. Now that I thought back over the conversation, I realized

Matsuno was the one guy who had been silent and sulking.

Yep, he'll probably be the final hurdle. No doubt about it.

I waved to Natsuki. "Bye, have a good time."

"Say, Izumi. Do you wanna come watch the fireworks with us?" Four-Eyes suddenly invited. My jaw dropped in shock. Natsuki, next to Four-Eyes, was looking at him uncomfortably, too. When I saw that expression on his face, I felt like crying again, and I shook my head. No way could I spend any more time near Natsuki. I was managing to talk normally right now, but my fake smile and my racing heart were both at their limits.

"There, Izumi says he doesn't want to. I bet the little Mama's boy wants to hurry on back to his mommy."

"Matsuno!" Natsuki rebuked his sneering companion sharply.

When Matsuno turned to glare at me, I met his gaze levelly. He had some nerve, calling me a Mama's boy like that.

Doesn't look like I'm ever gonna get along with this guy. Keeping my irritation firmly in check, I clucked my tongue at him.

"I'm not a Mama's boy—I'm Mom's manservant for the night."

"Huh?"

"If I don't play the dutiful son today, I'll be going without lunch for the rest of the summer. Does having to entertain my family at my age make me a tragic hero or what?" I lamented with an exaggerated sigh.

Take that!

The others, who had been watching us dumbfounded, broke into a sympathetic chorus of "That's rough, man." I'd only said it to break the tension, and having people pity me so sincerely gave me mixed feelings.

"And with that, I've gotta get going. Enjoy the fireworks, guys."

"Yeah, you too!"

Four-eyes and the others waved, and I got out of there. I

thought I heard Natsuki call out after me, but I didn't turn around. I was a keyed up ball of bravado, annoyance, and anguish, and I was going to explode any minute.

I rushed down the evening streets, finally able to relax my shoulders when I reached a convenience store. When I looked down at my hands, I could see impressions of each nail standing out clearly against my palms. I must've been clenching my fists the whole time. It was pretty pathetic how tense I'd gotten from one stupid conversation, but I didn't think I'd done too badly for myself. If nothing else, my responses were a big improvement over the way I'd been in the past.

The real reason I'd been able to perform so well, though, was that Natsuki had been there. I hadn't been working hard to get along with those other guys. I was just desperate to distract myself from Natsuki's presence.

A sigh escaped my lips. "Jeez, I haven't made any progress at all."

But maybe what happened today would lead to something good. As long as I didn't lose my temper, I should be able to get along without falling into the awful mudslinging battles from before.

"-mi?"

I rubbed my eyes, with the odd feeling that someone was calling my name. I turned around to look, but no one was there. Just when I'd decided I must've been hearing things, I sensed someone right next to me, and I jumped.

"Sorry, did I scare you?"

"Oh..." Slowly, I raised my head.

It was Natsuki, standing there panting for air. The light bleeding from the shop window illuminated one half of his face. It had the eerie effect of making him look like a different person, and I was oddly flustered.

"I thought you were going to watch the fireworks with the others," I said.

"I skipped out. There's something I have to talk to you about."

His eyes were serious.

Frightened and uncomfortable, I turned him down with an, "I'm in a hurry," and started walking off, but he caught up with me right away.

"Izumi, please, listen to me."

"But..."

"I just need a minute!" he pressed harshly.

I immediately tried to run. However, in my haste, I'd forgotten one important fact. I was wearing a yukata and clogs, which meant my movements were restricted. But I'd lifted my feet just like always, and in the blink of an eye I tumbled forward and fell down on the concrete.

"Izumi!" Natsuki rushed up to me.

Between the pain where I'd scraped my knees and the acute embarrassment, I couldn't lift my face to look at him.

"Are you okay? That was some fall you took."

"It's no big deal. So hurry up and get going. You'll miss the show." I made a shooing motion, but he stayed crouched beside me, and showed no signs of moving.

Now that I think about it, I guess there's no way this boy scout would ever leave an injured person alone.

I gave up, and gritted my teeth against the pain as I tried to stand. But—

"Huh?" I sputtered like an idiot. My eye level was really high all of a sudden. Somehow, before I knew it, Natsuki was carrying me in his arms. I blinked, just staring for several seconds into the face centimeters from my own.

"L-let me go!"

"Come on, now, don't struggle. We have to get that treated right away. What if it gets infected?"

"Don't worry about it! I'll go home by myself!"

"If you make too much of a fuss, people will start staring," he threatened maliciously, and that shut me right up. When I glanced around, the customers who'd just left the convenience store were

peering at us curiously. I was so mortified I could feel my face boiling. Even Natsuki seemed shy—the tips of his ears pinked just a little bit. He set a quick pace and chose the roads with the least light as he walked off, still holding me in his arms.

Natsuki carried me all the way to his house, ignoring my protests and repeated demands to be put down. When we got inside, silence rang through the giant old house. It was pitch dark. Natsuki said his parents were at the fireworks, too, so the only light on was in the living room, as an antitheft measure.

He took me to his room and deposited me on a floor pillow, then left again, saying “Wait here. I’ll go get the first aid kit.”

I told him he didn’t have to bother, but as expected, there was no answer. I sighed and looked around his room. For some reason, Natsuki had only turned on the paper lamp, so the light was dim. If I strained my ears, I could hear the faint but heavy booming of the fireworks in the distance.

I softly put a hand to my chest to still my fluttering heart. The cuts on my knees throbbed painfully; probably because my blood was racing so quickly in my veins. Just as the pain was putting me in a dark mood, the door slid open and Natsuki was back.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Is barley tea okay to drink?” He set down the tray he’d been carrying in one hand, and placed a blue glass full of barley tea in front of me on the table.

I was thirsty, so I didn’t hesitate. “Thanks,” I said, drinking. It was perfectly chilled and delicious. I could feel it cooling my whole throat.

“Okay, now I’m going to look at your legs.”

I quickly shook my head. “N-no thanks, I can do it myself.”

However, Natsuki acted as if he couldn’t hear me, grabbed my ankle, and said “Hold still.” He pushed up the hem of my yukata, baring my knees. I felt suddenly embarrassed, and tried to push his



hands away, but they didn't budge.

"It's okay. Don't worry, it'll be over soon," he said gently, and then swabbed antiseptic on my knees. It stung, and my shoulders jerked reflexively. The abrasions were wider than I'd thought. Little drops of blood like grains of sand were bubbling up all over them. Natsuki took out some gauze and gently wiped up the excess antiseptic. He neatly cleaned all the dirt that had gotten into the wounds, and then affixed giant bandages.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"That's it...I think..." I muttered without much confidence. Natsuki slid the yukata up as far as it could decently go, and began painstakingly inspecting my legs.

I was no girl, but I was still so embarrassed I thought my cheeks would burst into flames. When Natsuki's long fingers slipped behind one knee, and I felt them grasp my calf and then my heel, a shiver ran down my spine. I was afraid I'd start trembling.

I know he's only touching me to treat my scrapes, so why does it feel this good? In the process of falling for Natsuki, did I turn into a pervert, too?

I was fervently grateful that the room was so dark. I couldn't let Natsuki see my face like this.

When he finished checking me for injuries, he finally broached what was on his mind.

"Hey, Izumi. There's something I want to ask you..." he began earnestly. "So...um...where was Tagawa today?"

"Tagawa?" I repeated blankly. Now that wasn't a name I'd expected to come up.

Does he mean like, he's wondering whether Tagawa went to the festival with me, since we've been hanging out lately? But Natsuki's face looked too grave for that. As I puzzled over this, he abruptly lifted his head as if he'd firmed his resolve, and said something that totally blindsided me.

"Izumi, this person you're interested in...is it Tagawa?"

"Huh?! D-don't say weird things like that! He's my friend,

and he's a guy, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"But, you were holding each other and..." He swallowed the rest of the sentence.

I was so overloaded with astonishment and confusion that the gears of my brain totally jammed until I figured out what Natsuki was trying to say. He must've been watching while I was crying on Tagawa's shoulder the other day. True, I had been clinging to him pretty tightly, but it still seemed like a big leap to assume he was the person I liked.

My astonishment gradually turned to disbelief, and I heaved a huge sigh. "Look, it didn't mean anything like that. I was depressed about something, so Tagawa was comforting me, that's all."

"Then is the person you're interested in a girl?" he asked without pausing for breath. This time it was my turn to fall silent.

"Please, won't you tell me? I...I don't mean anything funny by it. I just really want to know." Natsuki's face was strained.

I tried to fake a smile, but my face just twisted weirdly.

The person I'm interested in is sitting right in front of me. I wondered what Natsuki's face would do if I said that. But there was no way I could say it at this point. Because Natsuki was dating Sugiura, and I didn't have a chance in hell.

"The one I'm interested in is..." My voice sounded horribly distant.

Should I just give some random name? Or wriggle out of it with a joke? Should I put on a smile, or put on a serious face? As I cast about for what to do, the muscles of my cheek actually started to twitch convulsively, and I panicked. On the spur of the moment I opened my mouth and blurted, "I like...you."

As soon as the confession came out of my mouth, I went, "Huh?" *Well, that wasn't what I meant to say.* I rushed to follow up with a "Just kidding," but I couldn't get my voice to work. A sob welled up in my throat, my face scrunched up, and I made for the door. But faster than I could stand up, Natsuki's hand reached out and captured my arm.

"Izumi!"

I fought like a wildcat. I rained down blows on him with my free hand, and kicked him too. But he wouldn't let go, and when I lost my balance he pushed me down until I was lying on the tatami. He lowered his long body to cover mine. Then I was being pinned in place by his arms, pressure bearing down on my whole body so that it got harder and harder to breathe.

"Izumi, calm down. Breathe slowly."

I heard Natsuki's voice right next to my ear. As he stroked my head, my breathing gradually came back under control.

"Did you mean what you just said?" Natsuki's eyes were riveted on me. They were filled with uncertainty. I had no idea what to do with that anxious look. I didn't have the strength left to keep up appearances anymore, either, so I just nodded.

The next instant, Natsuki's arms tightened their grip so hard I wondered if he was trying to squeeze me to death. "Ack!"

"I'm on top of the world. I'm so happy I could die." He buried his face in my shoulder. The arms wound around my back were trembling faintly. He was clinging to me for dear life, and bewildered, I softly laid my hands on his shoulders.

"But...what about Sugiura?"

"Huh? Sugiura?"

I weakly tried to push Natsuki away, and he frowned dubiously. "I saw how close you guys were. You had a pretty romantic mood going, too."

"What? Sugiura and I are just friends. I already told you we weren't dating."

"But she acts like she's really into you. And you were hugging and all. Plus, you went shopping with her too, didn't you? You even went to the trouble of lying to me about it."

"Oh, you were listening to that?" Natsuki's voice went skittish, and he looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry I gave you the wrong idea. But my relatives really were visiting, you know. And later we all went shopping together."

"...Together?"

"Yeah. Six of us total, including Sugiura and me. So it wasn't a date at all. It's true, she did once tell me she liked me, but I told her I didn't see her that way."

I definitely hadn't seen that coming, and I didn't know what to say. If Natsuki was telling the truth, did that mean all my suffering had been because of a misunderstanding?!

"B-but when you were talking with her in front of the nurse's office, you didn't look uninterested."

"Izumi, of course I was uninterested. I like *you*."

"Huh?" Startled, I looked up at him. His gaze was trained on my face. Seeing the serious look in his eyes, my heart started to pound, and I couldn't look away.

"When you told me in the nurse's office that you had someone you were interested in, everything went black for me. Why didn't you tell me right away how you felt?" he asked accusingly.

At the sadness in his voice, I dropped my gaze. "Well..."

At the time I was convinced you were going out with Sugiura, and I was so sad there was no way I could summon up the strength to tell you my feelings.

When I explained this in subdued tones, he gave me an intense look. "Izumi," he began. "I like you and everything that you are—the cowardice, and the warped parts, and all. After all, I've liked you all along, ever since we were in elementary school."

His whisper in my ear was passionate. It was setting my whole body on fire, making my eyes swim.

Feeling my fingers tremble, I said, "That's a lie."

"No, it's not," Natsuki replied fiercely.

"It's a lie. It has to be..."

"I wouldn't lie about something like this."

"Then why didn't you say so from the beginning?"

"...Didn't I?"

"No, you didn't!" I yelled at the top of my lungs before I could stop myself.

"S-sorry," he replied, caught off-balance. "I thought I'd told you, but I was pretty nervous too, you know? I guess maybe it slipped my mind."

"Slipped your mind"?! Give me a break..."

As I was beginning to doubt him again—how could the most important thing just "slip his mind"?—he suddenly leaned down and kissed me.

"Now will you believe me?" Natsuki whispered. I just lay there stunned, and he gazed down at me misty-eyed. He looked so mature, so sexy, so good I could die. My heart leapt in my chest.

Wow, I thought limply, *I guess when people say stuff like "She went boneless in his arms," that's not just a figure of speech. It really happens.*

Eventually I found my voice. "Don't go showing off your handsome face at a time like this. It's embarrassing me."

"Oh? Then I guess this face is good for something after all, if it affects you."

"Come off it. Good-looking guys get a lot of perks, and you know it." I accused, half-jealous and half-wanting to take it out on the guy who was smiling at me with such annoying confidence.

Natsuki cocked his head to the side a little, smile turning troubled. "When we were kids, people always told me I looked like a girl, so I've never liked my face. Though it's true that these days I'm a big, burly guy."

"Yeah, right. You're not burly."

If anything, Natsuki was on the thin side. I turned my attention to the body on top of me to confirm this... *Huh?*

What's this? There's this...weird sensation...

"...Like I said, I'm a man now." He smiled shyly, and then rocked his lower body into mine. I instantly went red. There was something hot and hard pressing against my thigh. Obviously I knew exactly what it was. I was a guy, too.

"I-Izumi, can we?"

"C-can we what?!"

"You know...um..."

We both fell silent, cheeks flaming in embarrassment. Neither of us could quite meet the other's eyes. But eventually Natsuki swallowed and gripped my hand tightly. "Let's have sex."

"Wh-whoa, hold it. Isn't that taking things too fast?"

"You don't want to do it with me?"

"That's not what I mean..." It wasn't an issue of wanting to or not; I didn't *get* it. I more or less knew how two men did it, but when I thought about actually doing it myself, my mind went totally blank. Plus, I felt so self-conscious I could hardly stand it. I was confused enough as it was by this sudden development, and now he was asking me where to *steer*, when we were hurtling along so fast I couldn't even see the signs. There was no chance.

"Izumi...I'll be gentle..."

I started panicking.

"N-Natsuki..."

"I'm sorry. I'm being greedy, huh? But when I think about how I can finally touch you, I can't stop myself."

He buried his face in my shoulder. Those soft lips touching below my jaw made my throat jump. They traced the curve of my neck, sending shivers zinging through the muscles there.

"Ah! W-wait...really, wait..."

"Izumi..." Natsuki panted hoarsely.

He looked so desperate that my heart wavered and I couldn't work up the strength to push him away. Maybe he didn't notice my hesitation, because he'd put his lips to the skin below my collarbone, sucking hard and making a mark.

"Ah..."

"Your yukata was open over your chest the whole time, and it was so sexy," he mumbled, as if to himself.

Natsuki was usually *over*-considerate of other people, but he hadn't even glanced at my face in a while. He was like a completely different person, face strained as he sucked on my skin, breath harsh. It was a little scary, but it was also a turn-on.

Then those lips latched roughly onto my nipple and sucked. A shock of mixed pleasure and pain shot through my body, and my hips jerked shallowly. Natsuki kept sucking, rolling the nipple around with his tongue, but he hadn't quite got the hang of things yet, and sometimes it slipped out of his mouth. I groaned impatiently, and he used his fingers to pinch the other nipple.

"Ah! Ah...why...why do you keep going after those?!"

"I don't really know what I'm doing, either...but doesn't it feel good?"

I nodded. "It does, but...it's hard to breathe," I whispered. I'd never been this close to another person before, and I'd never felt anyone's tongue on me, either. I was so keyed up that I was in tears.

"I-I'm sorry!" Natsuki hurriedly lifted his head and put his arms around me in a gentle embrace. A large hand stroked my sweaty back in a slow rhythm, and patted lightly when I let out a sob. I gradually calmed down, and I twined my arms around him.

"Izumi..."

We were both overheated and drenched in sweat, but we held each other fast. The sound of fireworks still echoed in the distance. I could hear our heartbeats too, pounding in answer to the fireworks. Natsuki pressed kisses against my temples—behind my ears—on my cheeks. At the same time, he undid my sash, and a hand slipped inside my robe over my stomach to stroke my side and thigh. I arched my back and gasped softly.

The sensations felt similar to lying at the edge of the water on a beach. Like when the ocean water, warm from the sun, wets your legs and your back and the tips of your ears. And below you the sand washes away, and you begin to sink. It doesn't feel "good" or "bad," just thrilling. But you can't help but wish you could lie there forever.

"Natsuki, um..."

Heat had rushed into my cock, and it was erect and pressing against Natsuki's thigh. Natsuki quietly pulled away, and then

abruptly slid down my body for some reason, face drawing toward my belly.

Don't tell me he's about to—

I had a bad feeling about this. I dragged Natsuki up by the arms. He tilted his head to the side as if to say "Can't I?"

Yeah, act as cute as you want, but no way do I have the guts to face a blowjob. I shook my head vigorously, face beet-red.

"Darn. Well, when you're used to this, then."

"Cut the crap or...ah!" I tried to give him a good glare, but then his hands were pushing down my boxers. "Don't—oh...oh..." Before I could reach down to cover myself, Natsuki's hand wrapped around my erection.

I'd sure as hell never had anyone *fondle* me before, and I let out a shrill cry. One man knows very well where to touch another man to make him squirm, and Natsuki's fingers moved in teasing strokes along the ridge behind the head, the vein on the underside, and the slit at the tip.

I had no experience with drugs, but I felt so mind-blowingly good I started to wonder if this was what it was like. My whole body was flushed with heat, and I couldn't hold still. I knew how dirty it made me look, but I couldn't stop my hips from rocking back and forth, writhing so violently it was like I was begging him to touch me more.

"I'm...oh...I'll..." I dug my nails into the tatami beneath me, so close to the edge, when Natsuki suddenly let go of me. "Huh?"

"Just a sec. I'll be right back, okay?" He sounded absolutely desperate, and as soon as he'd finished the sentence he flew out of the room in a mad dash.

I laid there stupefied.

What the hell was that all about? Did he get grossed out doing it with another guy after all?

I paled with fear before I heard violent footsteps coming back towards me. Several loud crashes sounded—he must've tripped over something. As I shrank my shoulders, the door opened to reveal

Natsuki sheepishly rubbing his knee.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine...but pretend you didn't hear that noise just now." He smiled crookedly and set something down on the tatami. It appeared to be salad oil. While I was wondering what he needed that for, he started to pour it over one hand.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry. I don't have any lotion or anything."

"Lotion?" I had another bad feeling. Big enough to send a chill down my spine. "Don't tell me you're—" Yep, the oil-slicked fingers were reaching down between my legs, lower than my groin. I instinctively tried to run. But before I had the chance, Natsuki grabbed my erection with his free hand, and I was trapped.

"No, don't, that's way too embarrassing!"

"It's okay, all right?"

I had no idea *what* he thought was so "okay," but he just kept repeating the same words over and over. I tried giving him a tearful, you're-such-an-irresponsible-jerk glare, which he returned with a sappy smile and an "Izumi, you're so cute."

No fair! He must know exactly how much one kind word really gets to me.

I was bitter, but I'd lost, and that was that. "Here goes," he whispered, and prodded down there with his finger, wriggling it gently.

I cried out. "S-stop playing around, moron!"

"I'm not playing around. I'm relaxing you," he answered seriously. I yelled that that was even worse. Natsuki took full advantage of my distraction, and slipped his wet finger inside me.

"Oh..."

The first thing I felt was discomfort. I was intensely conscious of the fact that something other was inside me, but there was no pain, I guess thanks to the oil.

Huh, this totally seems more doable than I imagined—

Or so I naïvely thought. As soon as Natsuki's finger pushed in

further, it hurt like a son of a bitch.

"D-don't, it hurts!"

"That's because you're tensing up. Breathe deeply, and relax..."

"Relax? Yeah, right! Ah... moron!"

"Hmm...okay then, try spreading your legs."

"I can't, it's too embarrassing."

"But if you stay this way, it'll hurt." Natsuki tenderly cajoled and encouraged, and I reluctantly did as he told me. "Good boy, Izumi..."

Natsuki's seeing me naked and spreading my legs wide.

That alone was so mortifying I could die. Blood rushed to my head, and I could feel myself starting to lose consciousness, when—*oh*—Natsuki's finger entered me as if to wake me up. It gradually buried itself all the way to the base, wriggling like a little fish. I shivered in concert with each movement. I had no idea whether the sensations thrilling through my body were hot or cold, pleasure or discomfort. But when I gasped that the pressure was too much to take, suddenly at the bottom of this unfamiliar sensation there was a brilliant flash of light. "What..." I panted. "What, ah, what was...?"

It was over in an instant, leaving me puzzled, but then Natsuki's finger touched a certain spot, and there was that strange feeling again.

Okay, this is—this is different. This feels really, really good.

I got scared, and started to struggle. "N-Natsuki...don't, not there! Not there!"

Natsuki was whispering something in my ear, but in my confusion, I couldn't hear him. He clicked his tongue a little, and abruptly covered my lips with his own. He sucked on my upper lip and nibbled on my lower lip. It was a gentle kiss, meant to soothe. It felt so nice that I blissed out a little, and finally relaxed my muscles.

"Natsu...ki..." I purred. He withdrew his finger and held me

tightly. That muscular chest fit snugly against mine, our heartbeats overlapping. Natsuki kissed my cheeks and stroked my hair, and then with no warning whispered, “Relax.”

I didn’t even have time for a “Huh?” before the next shock assailed me.

Natsuki’s cock was dripping wet—had he spread oil on it, too?—and something much hotter and more overwhelming than his finger was trying to force its way through my narrow entrance. I could hear this constant, awful squelching sound.

“I-it hurts... That hurts, Natsuki!”

“Calm down. Breathe slowly...right, that’s good...” He tried his best to soothe me, but I just shook my head like a little kid throwing a tantrum. It hurt, and it was killing me, and I knew it made me look pathetic, but I couldn’t stop crying.

“Natsuki, don’t look at me...”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a mess right now.”

“That’s not true. You look really cute, Izumi,” Natsuki said gently, but I shook my head with all my might.

Of course you think that. You have it good. You get to play the man here, and you’ve got the most studly face I’ve ever seen. But I have to play the woman, and I’m freaking out so bad it’s pathetic. If you see me acting so different from my normal attitude, you might lose interest!

“You know what, Izumi? I’m really happy right now,” Natsuki breathed right next to my ear, and then started slowly moving his hips. With each thrust, something inside me coiled faster and tighter, and I panted in wild abandon. The maelstrom overtook my whole body, and I was afraid it would sweep me away. “I’m scared,” I said, crying like a little kid. Natsuki comforted me like one, too, patting my back lightly.

“Izumi...hang on. This might get a little intense.”

“Huh? Wha...ah-ahhh!” A thrust hit that place inside me that his finger had played with, and I wailed. “Don’t do that!” This



stimulus was so much stronger than before. A sheen of sweat formed all over my skin, and I broke out in gooseflesh. I realized for the first time that pleasure too strong could turn into pain. For a moment I could only moan, but eventually I forced my mouth to form words.

“Don’t...I said don’t!” *Ohhh*. “I told you, I really don’t like that spot!”

“Wouldn’t you rather...ngh...feel good than hurt?” Maybe it was a little too tight for him, because he was groaning as if in pain.

I shook my head no, but Natsuki didn’t stop moving. At that point I stopped caring about appearances, and sobbed unashamedly. Then, my face a sticky mess of snot and tears, I shouted at him.

“I—told you—not to! I hate you, Mako!”

Upon which I dug my nails into his back, and came.

I was distantly aware of Natsuki whispering something to me as he clutched me tightly. The whisper was all tangled up in a long sigh, and I couldn’t really make out the words. Feeling something spilling deep inside me, I slipped out of consciousness.

Apparently, I’d passed out for a little bit.

When I opened my eyes, Natsuki had lain me down on the futon. The lights had been turned on, too. He’d also wiped me down, and I was dressed in a T-shirt and sweatpants. It was pretty humiliating to think that I’d made Natsuki clean me up, but every time I tried to stand up, I couldn’t even summon the strength to move. I probably wouldn’t have been able to take care of it myself.

“Izumi, can you sit up?”

I lifted my head at the sound of Natsuki’s voice. At some point, he’d changed into sweats. He was currently peering intently at my face.

When I looked down, I saw he was holding a glass of water in one hand. He passed it to me after helping me sit up and the cold

water was heavenly. My over abused throat smarted gently at its touch. I finished it and then sat there vacantly, exhausted.

“What’s wrong?” Natsuki asked worriedly after a while. “You’re totally out of it.”

“Nothing. Just, we really did it, you know?”

“Well, yeah, but...you pick the strangest times to be direct, don’t you?” His lips quirked into a wry smile. Normally *he* was the one who gushed out one embarrassing thing after another, but when I did it, he got shy, too.

“It doesn’t feel real. I never thought there was a chance we’d end up like this.”

“Yeah, me either,” Natsuki said.

“You sure about that? ‘Cause you were Mr. Confident back in the beginning, when I asked you out.”

“That’s because I knew you weren’t serious. But I thought, ‘This is my chance.’ I figured that if I got to be around you, maybe even if dating was hopeless, we could at least be friends again.” Natsuki’s eyes were distant. He gently wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

Foreheads pressed together, our eyes met. I felt a little shy, but I quietly closed my eyes and accepted Natsuki’s kiss.

“I love you, Izumi.”

A kiss was fine, but his direct admission was too embarrassing, and I could only give a perverse answer. “Don’t murmur crap like that right into my ear, moron.”

“You’re so mean. Come on, Izumi. Tell me again that you care.”

“Of course I do. Drop dead, creep.”

“Did you have to go *that* far?” Natsuki implored, wide-eyed. He looked so pathetically disheartened that I couldn’t suppress my laughter.

Come to think of it, I used to tease Natsuki like this all the time, didn’t I?

A wave of nostalgia washed over me. We’d changed a lot since

those days when we were close friends. Just yesterday, that fact had been a source of continuing grief. But now I was so happy. It must be because even though he'd changed on the outside, Natsuki's kindness hadn't changed a bit.

I hugged Natsuki tightly, savoring the affection that was filling me.

Maybe I can tell him I love him, if I only have to get it out once. I shoved aside the embarrassment and opened my mouth, leaning in close to Natsuki's ear.

"Moron," I whispered.

The Day The Prince Snapped



The Day The Prince Snapped

When all the girl's clothes came off, Matsuno's nose started to bleed. Natsuki just shrugged, and then lobbed the tissue box toward his friend. Matsuno shot him a grateful look and immediately pressed a handful of tissues to his nose before turning to face forward again.

Three of their other friends were in the room with them, but nobody was teasing Matsuno. They all had more pressing things on their minds. Each sat formally on his heels with eyes wide and nostrils flared, hands balled into fists on his lap, eyes riveted on the porn movie playing on the TV. Natsuki could definitely sympathize with their feelings, but they were pathetic to look at.

He suppressed a smile and pretended to be as engrossed as they were. They were holding this porn viewing for him, after all.

It had all started with a text from his classmate Kimura.

"There's something I'd like you to see."

Natsuki had tried texting back asking what was up, but Kimura had refused to elaborate, and when pressed would only repeat,

"Please, just come take a look."

What was more, the way the texts were phrased seemed to indicate something pretty serious. Feeling he had no choice, Natsuki had promised to see this mystery thing, and Sunday afternoon found him visiting Kimura's place, where Kimura met him at the door with a grin, bringing him back to the bedroom saying, "Come in, come in!"

Inside were Matsuno and three of their other friends, waiting for him with eager impatience. Natsuki flinched when he saw the strange gleam in their eyes. When he asked what they were doing, Kimura got a downright lewd grin on his face and informed him that they were going to watch a really great porno movie.

All of Natsuki's strength instantly drained out of him. He'd braced himself for something serious! He told them that he'd be going home, but they all grabbed him with a chorus of "Come on, don't be shy," and dragged him down to sit on the floor next to Kimura. And so, he'd been forced to participate.

"How about it, Natsuki? Pretty amazing, eh?" Kimura leaned over to whisper when it got to the good part.

"Yeah, you might be onto something. They do look a lot alike."

"Alike nothing! They're practically twins, dontcha think? Heck, that might be Erina Chitose for real!" Kimura laughed like a perverted old man.

Natsuki mumbled something vague in response and turned his attention back to the TV. It was true; the woman gyrating her hips on the screen really did look just like Erina Chitose, the celebrity.

Before they'd started the movie, they'd told him the story: Kimura had found the DVD at the rental store, and since the porn star in it looked exactly like Erina Chitose, he'd rushed to text everyone else. They'd sent the serious sounding text message to Natsuki because they'd wanted it to be a surprise. Natsuki had said a while back that Erina Chitose was his type, so they must have read too much into it. Now they were trying to do him a favor.

But the fact was, it was a totally unwelcome favor.

Kimura noticed that Natsuki wasn't that into it, because he was pursing his lips.

"Jeez, man, you don't seem too thrilled," he said in a miffed voice.

"Well...I do think she's cute, but no, I guess I'm not that thrilled."

The woman on the screen *wasn't* Erina Chitose, but that didn't stop Kimura from jumping to conclusions. "What, is this like 'I didn't want to see my beloved pop idol doing filthy things like this'? You're more pure-hearted than we thought, huh?"

Denying this seemed like more trouble than it was worth, so Natsuki just went with it. He sure couldn't tell them that Erina wasn't *really* his type. The only reason he'd ever been interested in her was because her eyes reminded him of someone he'd been in love with for a long time.

Just as the Erina look-alike was spreading her legs, Tagawa spoke up for the first time. "Hey—it's true this chick looks like Erina Chitose, but doesn't she look a little like Izumi, too?"

Natsuki's heart skipped a beat. But he was the only agitated one. Everyone else was just frowning.

"Izumi? You mean *that* Izumi?" They all said.

"Don't be stupid, man. Izumi's a guy!"

"Look, I'm just saying a *little*, okay? Like, around the eyes."

"You really think so?" Matsuno's admiring eyes were still glued to the screen. The others all followed his example and gaped at the porn star. Just as they were trying to superimpose Izumi's face onto the woman's, Natsuki lost it.

"They don't look a thing alike! Don't say stuff like that!" His shrill voice echoed through the room, far more angrily than he had intended. His friends' eyes bugged out with astonishment at this furious display.

"What's the matter, Natsuki? Are you pissed that we said your beloved Erina looked like Izumi?"

"N-no, that's not..." He let his gaze wander to avoid making eye contact with any of them. He couldn't tell the truth, but he couldn't think of a good way to talk his way out of it, either.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then Kimura started laughing. "Yeah, you're right."

"If Mr. Erina Fan here is so sure they don't look alike, you've gotta be imagining things, Tagawa."

"S-sure. But you know, it's not like I think they're all *that* much alike!"

"Course not! If this chick looked like Izumi to you, you'd need a *serious* eye exam."

In time, with the exaggerated shrug of Kimura's shoulders, a particularly loud gasp echoed from the TV. The couple onscreen was finally getting down to business. Everyone swiveled back toward the TV, instantly forgetting the conversation and turning their whole attention to the porn.

That was close, Natsuki thought, privately relieved. Unlike the rest of the boys in the room, he watched the sex scene with indifferent eyes. He'd said that they didn't look anything alike, but in reality he agreed—just around the eyes, she did look like Izumi. In particular, the way her face twisted with pleasure was exactly the same. When he'd slept with Izumi, Izumi had knit his brows with that same look of anguish. And then he'd called Natsuki's name with that uneasy look on his face, eyes filled with tears, and started gripping him like a vise.

"Ngh...aahhhh!"

When the porn star opened her mouth, the erotic cry Natsuki heard was Izumi's and it made him gulp. The image of Izumi that had sprung to his mind superimposed itself onto the woman on the screen, panting and hot for *him*. Izumi wantonly spreading his legs, pleading with Natsuki to enter him right now, rolling his slender hips obscenely even as he bashfully averted his eyes.

Natsuki put a hand to his parched throat and expelled a heated breath. His groin was throbbing wetly. It felt like it was boiling. He wanted to screw his hot, panting Izumi so bad, he could hardly bear it. He wanted to make him sob, pound into him, make him come completely, messily undone.

"More! Give me more!"

The Izumi in his fantasy writhed, and in that instant Natsuki bounded to his feet.

"N-Natsuki?" Tagawa called after him in surprise, but Natsuki

didn't have the leisure to answer. He flew out of the room and padded hurriedly down the hall to dive into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him nearly hard enough to break it.

The next day, Natsuki arrived at school with shoulders slumped. He heaved a giant sigh the moment he sat down at his desk. For any student, Monday morning was a miserable time. Even Natsuki, who enjoyed school life, found them a little discouraging. However, that wasn't the only reason for his unhappiness. He'd hardly slept the night before.

Clutching his head, he turned around to look behind him. Izumi's stuff wasn't on his desk, so he wasn't there yet. Just as he felt a rush of relief—

"Morning, Natsuki," said a voice in front of him.

Natsuki's shoulders jumped high enough to reach his ears. When he swiveled back around, there was Izumi, school bag hanging from one hand. A tuft of hair was sticking straight up from the back of his head. Maybe he'd overslept again and had to run to get to school on time. Natsuki thought it looked cute, like a pig's tail, but he was sure that comment would get him in trouble, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Good morning," he answered as usual, hiding his discomfort.

But Izumi noticed the slight change in him. The other boy tilted his head suspiciously, and peered at Natsuki's face with intense concentration.

"Hey, you look kinda pale. You sick or something?"

"N-no, I'm not sick. I stayed up late last night, though; maybe that's it."

"Huh, you don't do that too often. What were you up to?"

Natsuki had no answer to this innocent question. He'd gone

straight home after the porn session, but the lust it'd ignited in him kept smoldering, and he'd holed up in his room for the night, masturbating into the small hours.

But there was no way he could tell Izumi, "I was jerking off all night fantasizing about you." Avoiding Izumi's eyes, he lied and said he'd been studying.

"Man, you really are a hard worker, aren't you?"

"No, I'm..." Natsuki felt a stab of guilt at Izumi's impressed gaze. Casting about for a change of subject, he decided to broach a plan he'd been working on. "A-anyway, do you want to come over to my place on Sunday?"

Izumi's eyes widened in puzzlement. "That was out of the blue. What's going on?"

"We haven't hung out lately, you know? What, do you have other plans?"

"Well, no. But how about you come to my place this time? It's not fair to your parents to always do stuff at your house."

Izumi's offer was more than a little tempting. However, Natsuki had an ulterior motive for his invitation. Natsuki gestured with his hand for Izumi to come closer, and when the other boy complied, he leaned over and whispered in his ear: "But see, this Sunday my parents aren't going to be home. Know what I mean?"

Izumi's cheek promptly gave a little twitch. Natsuki grabbed his wrist before he could act on his reflexive impulse to run, and smiled sweetly. "Okay?"

Seeing that smile, Izumi went bright red. "Moron. What if someone heard you?!" he hissed in a low voice.

"Don't worry, nobody's listening."

"How would you know?! Lemme go!" Izumi shook the arm Natsuki gripped with unnecessary vengeance.

Izumi looked so cute that Natsuki just gazed at him, grinning like an idiot. Maybe he was being a little mean, but he thought he deserved to get away with this much. Natsuki was only human, and now that he knew his feelings were requited, he wanted to indulge in

his fair share of sweet caresses. After all, ever since he'd first slept with Izumi over summer vacation, he hadn't even been permitted a kiss, let alone a second session.

"Hey, Izumi. Don't you like it when I touch you?"

"What are you talking about, idiot?!" Izumi yelled, sounding angry. Tears, possibly of mortification, welled up in the corners of his eyes. Natsuki was afraid he'd gone too far, but he just wanted to know how Izumi felt.

Natsuki knew that sex wasn't the only way to express love. But he was a healthy teenager. On top of which, the object of his affections was someone he'd had a one-sided crush on for years. Telling a guy in his shoes not to get excited was asking for the impossible. He didn't care if anyone called him a sex fiend; he wanted to do it with Izumi. He wanted to touch Izumi to make sure of Izumi's feelings.

The people around him thought of Natsuki as a "pleasant, kind, sincere, all-around nice guy." But they were giving him too much credit. Behind his solemn façade, he had as many dirty thoughts as the next guy. To the point that he stayed up all night torturing himself with fantasies about Izumi.

"I'll let you go as soon as you tell me whether you like it or not. Did you not like what we did that night?"

Izumi went bright red and dropped his gaze. "I'm telling you, don't..."

At that moment, a cheerful voice suddenly rang out from behind him, drowning out whatever Izumi was saying. "Hiya, Natsuki! Morning!" When Natsuki turned around in surprise, he saw Matsuno standing there. He glared, pissed at the guy who'd interrupted them just when they'd gotten to the good part, but Matsuno remained oblivious. When he saw Izumi, he broke into a grin.

"Hey, you got any porn star relatives, by any chance?"

"Huh?"

"See, yesterday, we had a porn viewing in Natsuki's honor.

And the star looked just like Erina Chitose, but Tagawa said, 'She looks like Izumi, too!', and—"

"Ack! Matsuno!" Natsuki hurriedly put a hand out to cover Matsuno's mouth.

But it was too late. Izumi had abruptly gone expressionless. "Oh, *really*..." he murmured, looking at Natsuki with veiled eyes.

"I-it's not what you think. It wasn't like that. Kimura called me over there without telling me what for."

"But Natsuki, you were totally into it! You were the very first one to make a run for the bathro—*ow!*" Before Matsuno could say anything else, Natsuki aimed a vicious kick at his leg.

Izumi's face had gone even more blank, eyes fixed on Natsuki. That silent gaze devoid of any visible emotion was a lot scarier than nice, straightforward rage. Natsuki felt cold sweat trickle down his back. He racked his brains for a good excuse, but nothing came to him.

Without warning, Izumi transferred his gaze from Natsuki to the boy just stepping into the classroom. "Oh, Tagawa."

When Tagawa heard his name called, he gave a casual wave and came over to join them. "Yo, Izumi. What's up?"

"You free this Sunday? I need to buy some clothes. Wanna come shopping, too?"

"Hey, sounds good. I have some stuff to get, too." Tagawa nodded, beaming with enthusiasm.

Natsuki, on the other hand, panicked. "Sunday you and I are supposed to—" he began, but before he could get the words out Izumi turned toward him.

"What, you got a problem?" Izumi asked.

In the face of Izumi's razor-sharp glare, Natsuki had no choice but to back down in dejection.

Izumi then turned his back on him, and went over to Tagawa's desk.

Is he laughing and talking over there with Tagawa just to rub my face in it? I want to clear this up right now, but I can't do it now

that everyone is coming in.

"What's with him?" Matsuno muttered, cocking his head. "D'ya think he wanted to watch the porn with us, or something?"

Natsuki was so drained, he didn't even have the energy to talk to Matsuno. He slumped morosely over his desk and buried his hands in his arms.

I bet—no, I'm positive—he thinks I was enjoying the porn. I've got more urgent problems to think about right now than how to wrangle a second roll in the sack out of him.

If I don't clear up this misunderstanding with Izumi, worst-case scenario—no, he didn't even want to finish that thought. He'd kept pining for Izumi all that time Izumi had hated him. He hadn't given up even after being rejected. He'd gone through so much for this love, and now it had finally been accepted and returned. Like hell am I gonna back down this easily! He clenched his fists tightly, raising his head.

Makoto Natsuki was usually a sensible guy, but when it came to Izumi, he was a stubborn mule.

Over the next few days, Natsuki tried to corner Izumi and talk to him. But his phone calls and text messages were ignored, and when he tried to talk to Izumi at school, he was thoroughly avoided. It seemed that Izumi was even angrier than he'd thought. But Natsuki couldn't give up that easily. So he kept tracking Izumi down and repeating, "I want to talk to you."

Whether because that stubbornness—*passion*—had gotten across to Izumi, or just because he'd finally been worn down, by Friday, he grudgingly agreed to meet Natsuki the following afternoon.

And so on Saturday, Natsuki happily set off to Izumi's. His bedroom was as neat and tidy as ever, with everything in perfect

order. The bed that wasn't much higher than the floor, the bookcases built by stacking colorful plywood shelving units, the low table in the center of the room. Natsuki'd had so much fun in this room as a child.

"I thought this the last time I came here, too, but this place has hardly changed since back then, has it? It really brings back memories."

"Just hurry up and sit down," Izumi said sulkily. He set the glasses of tea he'd just brought down on the table. Obviously, he was still put out. He hadn't smiled once since Natsuki had arrived. Natsuki breathed a small sigh, and then sat down opposite Izumi.

"Izumi, are you still mad?"

"About what?" Izumi snapped back, shutting him down.

"Like I said in my text messages, that really was a misunderstanding. I didn't know what they were planning. I mean, if I'd known we were going to watch something like that, I never would have gone."

"I don't see why not. You're in high school; it's normal for you to watch porn."

"Izumi..." Natsuki said, pained, and Izumi angrily turned away. The boy was pretty cute when he sulked, but times like this left Natsuki at a loss. After some reflection, he crawled over to his lover and hugged him around the shoulders.

"L-lemme go! What if my parents came in and saw us?!"

"Nope. I won't let you go until you listen to me."

"I *am* listening!"

"No, you're not. Look, I can see why you'd be mad, and I'll apologize as many times as you want, but please don't avoid the subject." He restrained Izumi when the other boy struggled to get free, and then grabbed his chin in one hand, forcing Izumi to turn and face him.

Izumi immediately went beet-red. That flustered expression was so cute, Natsuki wanted to kiss him, but he forced himself to wait. If he did that, Izumi would lose his temper for real.

So he just whispered, "Okay?" and then moved his fingers from that finely sculpted jaw to gently stroke Izumi's cheek. Izumi was still sulking, but as Natsuki caressed his face, his harsh expression gradually started to waver, and eventually he settled down.

"...But you did enjoy it."

"Huh?"

"The porn," Izumi continued awkwardly. His face remained stiff. "I mean, Matsuno said you were the first one to..."

He must be talking about how I was the first one to make a break for the bathroom. Natsuki wasn't sure how to respond. He hadn't done that because the porn turned him on, but he was reluctant to admit that he'd jacked off imagining Izumi.

"Well, see, I really had to pee..."

"You're lying."

"Yeah," Natsuki acknowledged meekly. That excuse was just too pathetic.

Do I have to tell him the truth now? The idea didn't sit well at all with his masculine pride, and he didn't want to seem lame to Izumi, but...

Izumi abruptly broke into this inner struggle to say in a biting voice, "Look, are you sure you wouldn't rather be with a chick?"

"Of course not. What are you even talking about?"

"But you can get off thinking about women, right? So I don't see why you should bother dating a guy. Or are you just with me out of sympathy—"

Natsuki cut off the words by clapping a hand over Izumi's mouth. "Hey, you're going to make me mad, you know." The other hand tightened fiercely on his shoulder, and Izumi grunted in pain, but Natsuki still couldn't tamp down his anger. His face twisted into a grimace. "Don't you believe in how I feel about you? Do you honestly think I'm dating you out of sympathy, Izumi?"

"I'm sorry," the smaller boy answered after a moment. "I didn't mean that."

"I know, but it still hurts me."

Natsuki sighed deeply, and Izumi murmured another "I'm sorry."

Tears were forming in Izumi's downcast eyes, and he was quietly despondent. He looked at once helpless and adorable, all the more so for the stark contrast with his usual cocksure attitude. It tickled Natsuki's heart, and he tenderly drew Izumi's head against his shoulder.

"It's over. Don't worry about it. Listen Izumi, it's fine to get insecure sometimes, but just let me know, okay? Because I promise, I'll tell you everything. When we were watching the porn...I didn't get off thinking about the actress; I got off remembering you."

"Huh?" At this revelation, Izumi's jaw dropped and he looked pole-axed.

Suddenly embarrassed, Natsuki pressed his lips to Izumi's temple as a distraction. He let the hand that had gripped Izumi's jaw drop to trail down his side. Even just pressing against him tickled, because Izumi's waist was squirming. Well, when his lover's skin tried to wriggle away from him like that, it made Natsuki even more eager to give chase, so he stubbornly caressed even lower.

"Hey, stop it!"

"Can't we?"

"But my parents might come home..." Izumi looked nervously toward the door. His father was working, and his mother had gone out shopping.

"Naw, we're fine, they won't be back for a while," Natsuki whispered raggedly. His hands crept under the hem of Izumi's shirt. When he touched his side with no clothing between them, Izumi's skin quivered. Natsuki had meant to caress gently, but the feeling of his lover's skin was so good that before long, he was running his hands so wildly up and down the other boy's back that he could hear the rustle of clothing echoing in his ears.

"Wait, seriously, I said don't!"

"It's okay. It's totally okay, all right?"

"What's okay about it, you moron?! And the look on your face

is creeping me out! Don't come after me with your eyes blazing like that!" Turning desperate, he pushed away Natsuki's approaching face.

For a few moments they glared at each other, panting. Natsuki's gaze was baleful, but eventually, he raised his hands in surrender.

"Fine, I'll stop...but can I at least kiss you?"

"Drop dead." Natsuki's shy lover was cruel to the last.

"All right, then come to my place tomorrow and—"

"That's a no-go too. I have plans with Tagawa."

"Oh, right. What if you called him and said you couldn't go?"

"It's not nice to cancel at the last minute."

Natsuki groaned. Izumi had a good point, but it still felt like he was being blown off even though he was the boyfriend, and it stung. Really, the fact that Tagawa and Izumi were getting along so well gave him mixed feelings. He knew they were just friends, but when Izumi was with Tagawa, he looked like he had so much fun.

He never smiles like that when he's with me!

But what kind of man could say that and not feel lame?

"All right, then, *next* Sunday let's meet up for sure. Okay?"

"Listen, you can't just spring that on me."

"We just started dating, you know. Don't you want to mess around some more, do some more things?"

"Okay, okay, okay! I see what you're getting at, so get your overenthusiastic face away from me." Izumi waved his hands in a gesture that practically screamed "Too much, back off!" He was blushing all the way to the tips of his ears, and desperately trying to calm his breathing. Even like this, he looked lovable, but when Natsuki smiled and called him cute, he snapped, "Shut up, you leech."

"Sheesh, I don't know what's supposed to be so 'princely' about this guy," Izumi shrugged to himself, giving Natsuki a disbelieving stare.

It hurt a little. With a crooked smile, Natsuki retorted "Well, get

over it, because I'm just a normal, letch of a high school student."

Until the next Sunday came, Natsuki spent his days keyed up like a grade school kid the night before a field trip. And there was a reason for that: the Sunday he'd be meeting up with Izumi was in fact Natsuki's birthday. He hadn't mentioned it—the thought of bringing it up himself was too embarrassing—but he wondered if Izumi remembered, even though he hadn't said anything about it when Natsuki had invited him.

Well, I'll be happy just getting to spend the day together.

When he thought back to the days when his love had been one-sided, he was keenly grateful for his current good fortune. His estrangement from Izumi had been agony. Being hated by the person he loved was painful enough on its own, but when that person was ostracized from the group because of him, and he didn't see a way to help him—it had been so bitterly frustrating.

Which was why he'd thought it was a miracle when that love was returned. Even now, sometimes the joy welling up inside him made him break into a sappy smile.

And on top of that, when he'd actually started dating Izumi, the boy had just gotten cuter and cuter. His sulking face, and his smiling face too. He'd hardly ever gotten to see them before, and now all those expressions were fresh and dear to him. Of course, when he'd passionately explained this to Izumi, his boyfriend had given him a nonplussed look, and he'd regretted saying anything.

I might have really turned him off there.

Natsuki knew that his feelings were too strong, too stifling. Maybe that was why Izumi hadn't allowed him even a kiss since then. Throughout his anguished musings, time was marching on, and at long last, Sunday arrived. As the time Izumi was supposed to meet him approached, Natsuki hovered in the living room next

to the front door, checking his watch over and over. He knew Izumi was punctual by nature, but he couldn't contain his impatience.

I'm like a dog being told he has to wait for his dinner.

No, today I have to play it cool, be a real Prince Charming, he told himself firmly, clenching his fists. And—

"Gah!"

As if mocking how silly he looked, the cell phone on the table started to buzz. Natsuki hurriedly picked it up and checked who the call was from. It was Izumi. He was apparently in a rush, and his opening "Is that you, Natsuki?" tumbled out at high speed.

"Izumi? Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I know I promised to meet you this afternoon, but would it be okay if we changed that to tonight?"

"Huh?" For a moment Natsuki didn't understand. "Wh-why?" he blurted stupidly.

"Um, well, Tagawa says he's got something he absolutely *has* to talk to somebody about."

"Does it have to be today? But I made plans with you first! Can't he talk to someone else?"

"I'm really sorry. But he sounded so upset," Izumi said apologetically.

True, maybe a friend who seriously needed to talk was one of those things that just had to take precedence. And normally, Natsuki would've understood and let it go, even if reluctantly. But today was his birthday. Not only had Izumi forgotten his special day, now he was going to go be with *someone else*.

"Fine," he answered shortly. His voice was so chillingly cold, it surprised even him. "If Tagawa's that much more of a priority for you, why not just forget about me and spend the whole day with him? He's more important to you anyway, right?"

"Natsuki..."

"But if that's how things are, then I wish you hadn't made a date with me in the first place. I think guys who cancel at the last minute are pretty mean."

Once he'd finished his tirade, Natsuki hung up, ignoring Izumi's voice shouting something from the other end of the line. He surrendered to his impulse to throw the phone against the wall, and then collapsed to the floor with a thump. The grain of the wooden ceiling boards swirled as tempestuously as his anger, and its color was as dark.

"How did things turn out like this?" he sighed.

Natsuki felt like an idiot. Without anything to base it on, he'd gotten all excited, expecting Izumi to celebrate his birthday somehow, but Izumi had completely forgotten what day it was. If you considered how long they'd been estranged, it was only natural he wouldn't remember. Natsuki was the immature one for getting so angry.

Intellectually he knew that, but Izumi wasn't the only one who was feeling insecure. Last week Izumi had had doubts, suspected that Natsuki would rather be with a girl. But Natsuki felt the same way about Izumi. Sometimes he couldn't help but wonder, did Izumi really love him? Or was he just mistaking the feelings that came from having a renewed relationship with his old best friend for something more than they really were?

There was no way Izumi would kiss him and have sex with him just out of friendship, but on the other hand, since that first time he'd said "I like you," he hadn't repeated it once and that made Natsuki feel more insecure.

"Damn, I'm pathetic."

What it comes down to is that I just don't have enough confidence in myself. That's why I took out my worries on Izumi.

Natsuki sluggishly sat up, and then crawled over to pick up his phone from where it lay next to the wall it'd bounced off of. He'd heard a distinct thud at the time, but it didn't seem to be broken.

I wonder if Izumi's at Tagawa's place by now? He couldn't stifle a flash of annoyance at the thought. He took a deep breath and centered himself, then called up Izumi's number and hit "dial." Then he sat on his heels and waited.

The impersonal ring sounded over and over, paying no mind to his impatience. But no one picked up on the other end.

Maybe he's not hearing the phone, since he's talking with Tagawa? Natsuki surrendered to the inevitable and gave up for the time being. However, when he tried again a while later, Izumi still didn't pick up.

Now things seemed to be taking too long, even if Tagawa did need to talk about something. Natsuki vacillated for a bit, but eventually he just couldn't take it, so he gave in and tried calling Tagawa.

"Hello?"

"Tagawa? Sorry to bug you."

"Oh, hi Natsuki. Whassup?"

"Say, Izumi's over there right now, right?"

"Huh? Izumi? No..." his friend answered, sounding startled.

"What?" Natsuki was equally surprised.

"You're sure you're not confused? I don't have any plans with him. More importantly, I've got a date with my girlfriend today."

"O-oh, okay, I see. Sorry for bothering you." Natsuki said his goodbyes and hung up. He had no idea what was going on.

Tagawa hadn't sounded like he was covering anything up. Which meant Izumi had been lying to him. But Natsuki couldn't think why Izumi would do that. If Izumi hadn't wanted to see him, he wouldn't have asked to push the time back when he could've just cancelled.

"What the heck is going on?" Natsuki wondered aloud, tilting his head. But no answer came to him. He couldn't rest until he knew how Izumi felt, though. Natsuki tucked his cell phone in his pocket, stood up, and then dashed out of the house, heading to Izumi's home.

When he made it to Izumi's place, Natsuki immediately dove into the entryway. Both of the elevators across from the mailboxes were stopped on the seventh floor, so he made for the stairs without hesitation, and ran up to the fifth floor.

He checked his voicemail and text messages one last time as he stood before the apartment door, but there was still nothing from Izumi. He schooled his ragged breathing and pressed the intercom button.

A pause. Then, there was an answer. "Hello?"

No doubt about it—that voice sounded depressed, but it was definitely Izumi's.

"Izumi?" he blurted. "It's me, Natsuki."

A sound like a gulp came from the intercom.

"Izumi, I'm sorry about before. I'm sorry I said something so mean to you without even letting you explain things."

But there was no response.

"Izumi, please let me in," Natsuki pleaded, mildly but firmly. Yet time dragged on, and still no response. He clenched his fists, biting back his irritation. He had every intention of waiting until Izumi came out to talk to him.

Then the door opened a sliver, and he lunged for the knob. There was an 'eep' of surprise from the other side as he gave the knob a good yank, and Izumi came tumbling into view. Natsuki seized the opportunity to slip past him into the apartment. It all happened so fast that Izumi just stood there gaping at him wide-eyed.

Suddenly, Natsuki noticed that his boyfriend's eyes were slightly bloodshot. *Huh?*

"Hey, that's unlawful entry, you know." Izumi was looking up at him with a bemused expression.

"Sorry. But what choice did I have? You won't answer the phone, no matter how many times I call."

"Well..."

"Tell me, why did you lie to me today? When I asked Tagawa, he said you guys weren't planning to meet up at all."

Natsuki had wanted to make this discussion as calm as possible, but he couldn't manage to keep the hurt and anger out of his voice as he grilled the smaller boy. Izumi picked up on that, and dropped his eyes apologetically. Perhaps he'd resigned himself to defeat, because he answered flatly.

"I couldn't tell you the truth," Izumi said.

"Why not? What was the truth?"

Izumi fell silent. Instead of replying, he turned wordlessly around and started walking away. Natsuki hastily followed him, but he wasn't running away. Izumi stopped walking outside his bedroom door, opening it and motioning Natsuki inside.

"What's going on, Izumi?"

"Just shut up and go in." Izumi's annoyance was plain.

Bewildered, Natsuki half-heartedly obeyed. The moment he saw the table in the center of the room, he let out a cry of surprise. On top of it was something completely unexpected—a strawberry tart, his favorite. And that wasn't all: chicken, salads, and glasses of iced coffee were all neatly laid out, like for a party. Natsuki was stunned speechless.

"Wh-what's this for?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No! I have no idea." Natsuki shook his head vigorously, and Izumi gave an irritable click of his tongue.

"Sheesh, it's...honestly, how can someone who's normally so perceptive be so freaking dense?! Or are you doing this on purpose? Are you just picking on me?!"

"Wh-what?! Are you blaming the victim? That's just unreasonable," Natsuki lamented pitifully.

But Izumi would only tell him, "It's your fault for not getting it." His face was red as a tomato, and his lips were pursed in displeasure, the way they always were when Izumi was really mortified.

Totally at a loss, Natsuki scanned the room one more time. This time, he saw a neatly wrapped little box next to the bed. "Wait..."

An idea flitted through his mind. But it was way too convenient an interpretation of things, and he couldn't believe it at first. However, no matter how he looked at the problem, it was the only answer he could arrive at. Natsuki screwed up his courage and voiced it. "Is this...for my..."

"Yeah. It's your birthday party," Izumi supplied.

Natsuki's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to say something. But his throat was choked up with happiness and surprise, and when he finally got the muscles to work, the only thing that came out was a foolish little sound.

"Wh-why didn't you tell me?" he said when he could speak. "If you had, I wouldn't have gotten those weird ideas."

Izumi's reply was brusque. "As if I could, after you told me how much I sucked for canceling on you. Besides, even I thought I was being a little childish, so it was embarrassing to...b-but I was planning to tell you everything and apologize after I'd gotten everything set up."

When Natsuki asked why he'd bothered to change the time and lie about it, his boyfriend replied that the tart hadn't been done in time. Imagining Izumi intently preparing for his birthday party, Natsuki felt an overwhelming flood of affection.

"Thank you. I didn't know if you'd remembered my birthday."

"As if I'd forget, moron. I'm not *that* heartless—wah!" Natsuki swooped Izumi into his arms without waiting for him to finish. He went so overboard on the enthusiasm that the momentum sent them falling onto the bed.

"What are you doing?!" Izumi cried, struggling to get up, but Natsuki pinned him fast and refused to let go.

"Hey, Izumi. I only get one birthday a year, so I want you as a present."

"What are you, a character out of a porno manga?! I bought you a present, and I made you food, too!" He jerked his chin toward the dessert. Without letting Izumi go, Natsuki grabbed a single

strawberry from the top of the tart and popped it in his mouth. The taste of its sweet-tart glaze spread on his tongue, and its fresh scent filled his nose. It was lush and juicy, like something you'd get at a top-class restaurant.

"Yeah, this is really good. Okay, we'll eat the rest later."

"Hey!"

"Don't worry, I'll eat the whole thing." Natsuki plucked another strawberry and gently prodded Izumi's lips with it. "You want some too?" he smiled.

Izumi obediently opened his mouth and took in the whole thing. His cheek puffed out like a hamster's as he chewed. It was adorable. "I'll take some of that too," Natsuki announced, and kissed the rounded cheek.

"When did you get to be such a perverted old man, anyway?"

"What guy's head *isn't* filled with pervy thoughts all day? What, don't you like doing this stuff with me?" Natsuki's asked seriously.

Izumi glowered in moody silence. Natsuki was starting to worry that he'd pissed his lover off until Izumi spoke up to say, "Wasn't I pathetic, though?"

"Huh?"

Izumi's legs squirmed in embarrassment. "I mean...when we, when we did it before...I didn't know what was going on anymore, and I'm worried I wasn't any good."

In other words, the reason why Natsuki hadn't been permitted even a single kiss since then was because Izumi hadn't been confident that he could do it well. His shamefaced expression was so charming, Natsuki shook with emotion.

"Izumi, what should I do...you're so cute right now, I think I'll get a nosebleed."

"Huh?"

When Izumi dubiously opened his mouth to say more, Natsuki latched onto it with his lips. Their strawberry kiss was sweet-tart and delicious and Natsuki probed with his tongue to taste more deeply.

When Izumi heard the wet kissing sounds, he tried to push Natsuki's shoulders away, hands trembling nervously. But Natsuki gripped those hands with his own, lacing their fingers together. The fingers under his quivered charmingly. Izumi's tongue was warm, and soft, and felt wonderful.

Natsuki drew Izumi's chin back gently to trace a path with his lips from there down his neck to his collarbone. His hands went to the shirt buttons at Izumi's throat, undoing them one by one. The widening expanse of skin revealed was pale and seductive, but the hands nervously balled into fists at Izumi's sides were like a child's. The contrast drove Natsuki wild.

"Izumi," he breathed before lightly taking one nipple into his mouth. He loved the feel of it tightening between his lips when he moved them. Now Izumi was gasping aloud and clinging tightly to him. "Does that feel good?"

"I-I don't know..."

"Do I need better technique?"

"What are you, an idiot?!"

Natsuki had asked the question in perfect seriousness, but given the harsh response, maybe Izumi thought he was joking.

Okay, he figured, *in that case I'll move my efforts elsewhere*. So he slid his lips down to Izumi's abdomen, but touching his side provoked the violent protest, "That tickles!" and kissing Izumi's navel got him yelled at "That's gross!"

Natsuki was a mild-tempered guy, but being resisted this much would tick anybody off. Frowning, he wordlessly took Izumi's jeans in his hands and yanked them—and the underwear underneath—down around his knees.

"H-hey!"

"Shut up a second," Natsuki said sternly, and then buried his face in Izumi's newly exposed groin. Izumi's penis was already half-hard. When he commented on how shapely it was, Izumi gave a weird groan and pounded on his shoulders.

Sheesh, it was a compliment.

Natsuki tilted his head and took that shapely penis into his mouth. When he laved it with his tongue, the hot length of it quickly grew bigger, and its heat surged higher, too. He licked a path from the base along the vein, and a trickle of fluid dribbled out of the tip.

"Ah! D-don't...I said don't!"

"Izumi, you say 'don't' too much."

"No, don't talk—ah!"

Izumi looked like he was on the verge of tears. The expression on his face was unbearably cute, and it made Natsuki even hotter. He could feel his own groin throbbing wetly, hungering for Izumi. Inspired by a mischievous impulse, he thrust his raging hard-on against Izumi's leg.

"Wh-wh-what?!"

"You asked me before if you were pathetic, right?"

"Yeah—so—what?!" Izumi ground out in time with their movement.

"You weren't pathetic at all," Natsuki whispered dreamily, gazing at him. "In fact, you were totally adorable, and you made me *so hot*. So hot I come just from imagining your face then."

At that, Izumi went stiff and still as a stone—except for his hands, which swiftly flew up to cover his face. "I don't wanna deal with you anymore," he said eventually.

"Again with the 'don'ts?' Natsuki asked, unable to contain a wry laugh.

"Shut up," Izumi snapped.

However, this time when Natsuki stroked Izumi's thighs and ass, Izumi didn't resist. But he couldn't help but get nervous again when Natsuki pushed his finger inside.

Natsuki kissed his cheek softly. "I love you, Izumi."

Izumi wouldn't say anything. He just jerked his gaze away, his ears getting redder and redder.

I wonder if he'd get mad again if I said I found this side of him unbearably cute.

Natsuki had the strong urge to tease Izumi, but in the end, he

kept his mouth shut. He had the feeling that if he picked on his shy lover too much, he would start crying.

"Relax your muscles, okay?"

Izumi was silent for a while, but then he nodded once.

Natsuki drew a single deep breath, and then pushed his own jeans down around his knees. Just the tiny shock of air hitting his already-erect penis had him shaking. His throat was dry, heat from his over-arousal was coursing through his body, and his eyes stung. "Izumi..."

He pulled off Izumi's jeans and underwear all the way, and then violently yanked his legs open, inserting his groin between them. Izumi arched backward in surprise, shivering. Perhaps his throat was dry, too; Natsuki heard him swallow over and over. He pressed a gentle kiss to that bobbing Adam's apple, and then entered his lover. When the head was halfway in, Izumi cried out and started fighting him fiercely.

"Don't—that hurts!" Izumi cried.

Izumi's face twisted horribly, as if he were in a lot of pain, and he started thrashing his legs, kicking Natsuki's back and thighs.

I guess there wasn't enough foreplay, and his body hasn't opened up yet.

That made Natsuki feel bad, and he soothed Izumi gently, firmly tamping down his own desire. "Izumi, relax your muscles. That'll make it easier, okay? Yeah, like that, that's good. Good job."

"Shut up, moron! Sure, this might be easy for *you*, but some of us don't have it so—nnngah!"

"I know. After this, I'll do whatever you want, okay? So just hang in there."

Izumi's response was a strangled sound. At some point, tears had started pouring down his face, and his arms were wrapped around Natsuki's back. Natsuki felt sorry, but on the other hand, he also felt conflicting emotions welling up in him: the desire to make Izumi cry even more, and the desire to be kinder to him.

To banish his cruel impulses, he expelled a breath and buried his head in his lover's chest. The rapid staccato of Izumi's heart was strangely pleasant. Taking deep breaths in and out, Natsuki wrapped his fingers around the other boy's penis and fondled it gently. A sweet, seductive sound slipped out of Izumi's mouth, and his body relaxed just a fraction.

Natsuki kept up his stroking diligently. It was anguish holding his own desire in check, but seeing Izumi like this, cheeks flushing and thighs beginning to rub against him kittenishly, he felt a warm rush of happiness entirely different from lust fill his heart. "Izumi...I love you," he whispered shakily, and then buried himself to the hilt with one thrust.

Izumi gave a sexy gasp and clamped down tightly around Natsuki. He heckled Natsuki with the usual cries of "moron" and "don't"—maybe it still hurt a little—but his damp passage gripped at Natsuki greedily.

"Izumi...you feel so good..."

Suppressing the urge to come, he pounded desperately into Izumi again and again. It felt so good, he couldn't stand it. He wanted to ravish Izumi more, harder. He knew he had to be careful, to make sure he didn't hurt his lover, but his desire ran away with him.

Izumi wailed brokenly and then came with a high-pitched scream. Natsuki lost control and spilled his lust, unable to even breathe for a moment. As they lay there shaking, the juices pooling between them spread a strange warmth over their groins.

As Natsuki sucked in a deep breath, he thought he heard a voice say, "I love you too, moron."

He nodded, and wrapped his arms around Izumi in a hug. He was so glad for that admission. So overjoyed, so bursting with happiness that he thought he would cry.

Afterwards, the two of them remained in a languid stupor for a while.

"I've been acting like a real child, huh?" Izumi mumbled suddenly, facing the wall as he lay there on the bed. "People usually don't have birthday parties in high school. I'm pretty embarrassed..."

"Oh? I think if you were really a child, we wouldn't do things like this," Natsuki answered, running lewd hands over Izumi's ass. Izumi smacked him in the head harshly.

"Hey, I'm being serious here!" Izumi said.

"Well, I answered seriously too."

"Yeah, right. Didn't sound that way to me, moron." Izumi frowned sullenly, effectively erasing the sweet afterglow of their sex. Natsuki hurriedly apologized. Stroking Izumi's hair, he attempted to change the subject.

"Anyway, I was really surprised you did this for me, Izumi! It made me really happy, of course," he added. Izumi sank into scowling silence.

Dammit, was that an off-limits thing to say, too?

Natsuki started to panic a little, but then he saw that Izumi's lips were pursed in that displeased look again. He grinned wryly.

Another thing you're embarrassed to talk about, huh?

"I don't know why, but I wanted to do it. Maybe it was because I was jealous."

"Jealous?"

"You were always getting invited to birthday parties, right? When I heard about it, I'd always think, 'Must be nice.' I'd think how I wanted to do that stuff with you, too..." Izumi's tone was detached, but he sounded wistful somehow.

It was true; over the last few years, Natsuki had been invited to many different events, and he'd often put in appearances. He'd thought he understood how Izumi had felt then, watching Natsuki's lively social life with everyone else when up until then, Izumi had been his closest friend.

But hearing it now from Izumi, his heart squeezed painfully.

"Say, Izumi, are you going out with me because..." No, it was just too lame asking this. But then again, he couldn't stop worrying about it.

While Natsuki was trying to make up his mind, Izumi glared at him and said peevishly, "It's not because I'm confused. I'm doing this with you because it's how I feel. More like, no way in hell would I let a guy screw me and like it just because we're friends. Idiot."

Those blunt, emphatic words were said gruffly, but with shyness and sincerity woven all through them, and it gave them an odd ring. It was a very Izumi way to say things, and Natsuki's face softened. Knowing Izumi understood exactly how he felt and was trying to reassure him made his heart glad.

"Oh...okay, thanks," he whispered. He gave Izumi a bright, happy smile that made Izumi blush.

That momentary vulnerability was adorable. The dashing, princely smile he'd worked so hard for dissolved into a goofy grin.

"That's a relief, though. So you feel good when we have sex, too."

"D-don't latch on to that part of it, you dope!"

"But you always look like you're suffering, so I'd been torturing myself thinking I wasn't any good. But hearing you say you like it is a huge relief." Natsuki balled his hands into fists and declared, "I'll get better, I swear!"

Natsuki's only thought in saying so was for Izumi—this time it had been going so well at first, and then midway through, he'd started hurting Izumi. So next time, Natsuki wanted to make it so he didn't feel any pain to lighten the burden.

But Izumi turned bright red and sent him flying with a well-placed kick, yelling "Get stuffed, you sick mega-pervert of a prince!"

Natsuki fell off the bed with an undignified squawk. Lying there naked on the floor, he looked nothing like a prince, and everything like a plain old tenth-grader.

Afterword

-Yura Tamaki-

"It feels pathetic spending my thirtieth birthday alone, so come over and celebrate it in a way that doesn't remind me of how old I am. And give me something while you're at it," typed Tagawa, telling Izumi to meet him at the pub.

When Izumi appeared, he wordlessly threw a piece of Tirol chocolate in Tagawa's face. "Happy birthday, Tagawa, you parasitic 30-year-old unmarried creep. There's your present."

"What, the anniversary of my birth is only worth ten yen?"

"You're behind the times, man. They're twenty yen now."

"Whoa, for real?" He picked up the candy and stared hard at it.

Who'd have thought something this tiny would get ten yen more expensive?

"Times sure do change."

"You haven't even been thirty for a day, and you already sound like an old man."

"When you get to be my age, you start to really feel the passage of time. Hey, what's that look for? You know, I'm not just saying that because I got dumped by a younger woman."

Tagawa gave this speech a histrionic flair, but all he got was a look of pity. He wished Izumi would reply with a joke at times like these, but his old friend was an ill-natured guy and always had been. Actually, it seemed like he was getting even more warped lately. Considering Izumi's work and love life were both going great and he basically had no problems, Tagawa was at a loss to explain this. The human mind was a mysterious thing.

Tagawa ordered some beer. "Hey, by the way, where's your precious darling today? Mountain-climbing again?" Tagawa asked, opening a menu.

Makoto Natsuki, Izumi's lover and Tagawa's friend, had been in a mountain climbing craze for about a year now. Though the two of them lived together, their work schedules didn't overlap at all, and their weekend hobbies were exactly opposite, too: Natsuki liked outdoor activities; Izumi liked indoor ones. But they were getting on all right anyway.

"Fifteen years, huh? You guys have stayed together a pretty long time," Tagawa said quietly, resting his cheek on his hand.

When Tagawa found out about their relationship during senior year of high school, he'd been certain it wouldn't stick. To him, romance was something you enjoyed more lightheartedly. He had no interest in an association with risks attached. So he'd followed their relationship with half respect and half disbelief, like he was watching two monks-in-training perform ascetic exercises: "Well, you've sure got energy."

Lately, though, he'd got to thinking. Maybe finding someone you shared the same feelings with, whom you could build a bond of trust and happily go through life together with, wasn't a piece of good fortune that was easily come by.

"Do you even realize how lucky you are?" Tagawa said cattily, wanting to tease his friend a little.

"Yeah." Izumi shrugged. "I mean, he could've landed someone better. I think he's a moronic freak for staying with a guy like me for fifteen years."

"What is that, deadpan boyfriend bragging?" Tagawa asked suspiciously.

The corner of Izumi's mouth quirked up in a smile. "Whoops, you got me."

"Your way of saying things is as warped as ever. Why don't you try just saying what you really mean some time?"

"Natsuki says the way I talk is cute."

"You know what? Never mind. You don't need to say things straight after all," Tagawa backpedaled, gooseflesh rising all over his arms.

They were a sickeningly lovey-dovey couple, but Tagawa knew they'd come close to breaking up more than once. They'd survived many trials, and kept on making the choice to live their lives together. And so Izumi and Natsuki were still together.

Tagawa liked what they had with each other. Having the two of them as a constant in this ever-changing world gave him a strange feeling of relief in those times when he found himself inexplicably forlorn.

May my old friends keep this quiet happiness forever, and may I find a wonderful lover too, Tagawa wished, and then touched his beer glass to Izumi's in a toast to his thirtieth birthday.

And there you have a side story desperately written to fill up pages in my afterword.

During this novel, I was made keenly aware of the importance of self-discipline after being done in by summer heat exhaustion, summer colds, and the like.

Apparently, once you're old enough that you stop growing and start just aging, you can't overwork yourself anymore. A certain person told me, "You can't rely too much on your own physical stamina." Quite right, I think.

Well, setting the personal stuff aside...

To Ms. Taishi Zaou, thank you very much for drawing such wonderful illustrations. I used to read your manga as a fan, so I can't get over my amazement that your drawings are in my book like this. I'm very sorry for causing you so much trouble on this project.

To my coordinator at the publishers, I'm sorry I was always whining and complaining. I'm sure my backwards thinking made

meetings with me very annoying. I'll watch myself better in the future.

And to all of you who picked up and read this book, thank you so much. If you've enjoyed yourself even a little bit, I'm happy.

Well then, I hope to meet you all again someday.

Yura Tamaki